

# The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region as an example of separatism in China

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7160/KS.2021.160105>

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will argue that the continuing incidents of violence that have occurred in the region known as the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, or Eastern Turkestan, are best understood as incidents of civil unrest in the public sphere, and rarely can be described as “secessionism” (*fenliezhuyi*) in the traditional sense of the term (which I take to mean coordinated acts of violence against the government and civilian populations for the purpose of establishing an independent state).<sup>1</sup> The struggles of the Uyghur people with the Chinese nation-state that have taken place since its incorporation in 1949 are best understood in the context of efforts to attain sovereignty, not as a religious or Islam-inspired campaign. Except for the fact that the Uyghur are a Muslim people, their concerns and issues resemble that of Tibet, and the occasional violence that takes place in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in China and protests against Chinese rule, are rarely if ever described as “terrorist,” though they are often lumped together with the Uyghur incidents as “secessionist” (*fenliezhuyi*). At the same time, in this paper an attempt will be made to show that the region of Xinjiang, which had been extremely peaceful since the late 1990s, but then erupted in the last few years, has been caught up in an economic boom that would be the envy of any of its surrounding Central Asian states. Indeed, China should be congratulated for the enormous economic and social transformation of the region over the past two decades, but at the same time should be encouraged to find ways to preserve and promote the vibrant and extraordinary Central Asian civilization that Uyghur culture represents.

## Keywords

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China, Uyghur, secessionism

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of coherence (cf. Introduction), we decided to translate *fenliezhuyi* as “secessionism” instead of “separatism”. Although the Chinese translation of “secession” is *tuoli*, “*tuolizhuyi*” is never used and what the Chinese authorities derogatively qualify as *fenliezhuyi* can cover, on purpose and in order to dismiss them, both the movements that fight for independence and the ones that only demand a meaningful political autonomy.

## Introduction

By paying attention to Uyghur engagement in the public sphere, especially domestically in the urban spaces of Urumqi and other Uyghur centers, such as Kashgar and Khotan, as well as examining further Uyghur participation in the virtual public sphere through new forms of social media and the internet, in this paper it will be argued that a new virtual community of Uyghur have begun to counter the hegemonic discourse of the Chinese state regarding to Uyghur unrest and aspirations in the region. Cites of contestation, it will be argued, have thus been translocated through these new forms of social media, leading to a re-territorialization of public space, not only virtually on the internet, but with real implications for actions on the ground. Arjun Appadurai<sup>2</sup> seminally argued that “deterritorialization” is a prominent condition of modernity at large in the new public sphere, yet I am suggesting that we are witnessing the increasing role of the internet in *re-territorializing* homeland spaces lost to subject peoples, often displaced by authoritarian regimes. In an earlier article<sup>3</sup>, I argued that growing Uyghur “cyber-secessionism” and “cyber-separatism” did not really pose a threat to the Chinese state at that time as it was supported by a disembodied mix of competing international diasporic groups who had little chance of mounting any organized resistance which could possibly challenge Chinese sovereignty within Xinjiang. In his masterful survey, Yitzhak Shichor similarly argued that contradictions and competing agendas among the diaspora kept the Uyghur from forming a unified agenda<sup>4</sup>. However, given the dramatic rise in Uyghur connectivity and recent events in the Middle East among the various Arab Springs and Jasmine Revolutions of 2011, in this paper I shall argue that a new virtual Uyghur community has begun to emerge in the diaspora that has indeed given Beijing much greater cause for concern. In short, this paper suggests that cyber-separatism is becoming more than just virtual for the Uyghur diaspora, and not unlike events in the Middle East, has begun to have real impacts on the colonized space that was once known as Eastern Turkestan leading, indeed, to a possible future re-territorialization. To some extent then, Uyghur cyber-secessionism/separatism could lead to the establishment of a virtual nation, but one that for

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<sup>2</sup> APPADURAI, Arjun. “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Public Culture* 1990, 2.2:1-24, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> GLADNEY, Dru C. Cyber-Separatism, Islam, and the State in China. In J. Craig Jenkins and Esther E. Gottlieb (eds.) *Identity Conflicts: Can Violence be Regulated?* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007, pp. 95-97.

<sup>4</sup> SCHICHOR, Yitzhak. Virtual Transnationalism: Uyghur Communities in Europe and The Quest for East Turkestan Independence. *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and Across Europe*, edited by S. Allievi and J. Nielsen, 281-311. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003, 283-284.

the distant future will remain outside of China, virtually existing in the diaspora and on the internet.

## **Rumblings from the West**

After nearly 10 years of relative peace in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, sporadic incidents of violence in 2008 presaged a huge urban uprising in Urumqi in 2009 that nearly overwhelmed local authorities, leading to the highest death toll from civil violence in the history of the People's Republic of China.<sup>5</sup> Previously, in 1997, bombs exploded in a city park in Beijing on 13 May (killing one) and on two buses on 7 March (killing two), as well as in the northwestern border city of Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, on 25 February (killing 9), with over 30 other bombings in 1998, and six in Tibet that year as well. Most of these are thought to have been related to demands by Muslim and Tibetan secessionists. Numerous members of the Uyghur Muslim minority have been executed since those events of the late 1990s, with hundreds arrested on suspicion of taking part in ethnic riots and engaging in secessionist activities. Though sporadically reported since the early 1980s, such incidents were rather frequent in the late 1990s, and harsh treatment by suspects involved in those incidents was documented in a scathing report of Chinese government policy in the region by Amnesty International.<sup>6</sup> As far as we know, these late 1990s incidents represent the only documented incidents of violence that appeared to be well-coordinated, taking place at the same time across urban and national spaces. Nothing since has matched the level of sophistication or coordination of these late 1990s events. The *Wall Street Journal*<sup>7</sup> reported the arrest on 11 August 1999 of Rebiya Kadeer, a well known Uyghur businesswoman once sent to represent the Xinjiang region to the International Women's Conference in Beijing (1995) during a visit by the United States Congressional Research Service delegation to the region, indicating China's strong response to these tensions. Amnesty International labeled Rebiya a "prisoner of conscience" as her only

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<sup>5</sup> Estimates range from 140-1000+ deaths, two-thirds Han Chinese, which led to unprecedented coverage and criticism in the Chinese media. See "Xinjiang riot hits regional anti-terror nerve", *Xinhua*, 7 July 2009, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/18/content\\_11727782.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/18/content_11727782.htm); also Minxin Pei, "Uighur Riots show need for Re-think in Beijing" *Financial Times*, 9 July 2009; "China says 140 Die in Riot, Uighur Separatists Blamed" 6 July 2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aBWP2E9DJPIU>. An extensive report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project of the Uyghur American Association was released on July 5, 2011, "A city ruled by fear and silence: Urumchi, two years on" <http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/July5-report.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International. *Peoples Republic of China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region*. London, 21 April 1999.

<sup>7</sup> *Wall Street Journal*. Ian Johnson. "China Arrests Noted Businesswoman in Crackdown in Muslim Region". 18 August 1999.

tangible offense was an unsuccessful attempt to meet with the USCRS.<sup>8</sup> Her release to the US in 2005, and her active role in promoting a “World Uyghur Congress” has led to her assuming a prominent position among the Uyghur exile community both in the US and abroad and her being labeled as a “terrorist” and “secessionist” by the Chinese government.<sup>9</sup> Her leadership has helped galvanize the Uyghur diaspora like never before, and lacking a Dalai Lama, some analysts have started referring to her as the “Dalai Mama” for the Uyghur diaspora. Skillful use of the public media and international news outlets have helped bring her message about the “plight” of her people to the greater public to an unprecedented degree.

It is important to note that the Uyghur protests and subsequent crackdowns of the 1990s and mid-2000s have rarely been connected to freedom of religion issues, but rather to a range of “indigenous rights” issues, of which religion is only one concern. Chinese officials argue that “splittists” (that is, secessionists) violate the law and that full freedom of religion is allowed under Article 36 of the constitution.<sup>10</sup> An earlier White Paper on nationalities policy in China published just prior to the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the PRC in October 1999, argued that religious freedom was guaranteed for all minorities, but acknowledged continuing problems in minority regions, especially vast economic inequities (China State Council 1999).

Despite on-going tensions and frequent reports of isolated terrorist acts, there has been no evidence that any of these actions have been aimed at disrupting the economic development of the region. Not a single documented incident has targeted infrastructure (railways, bridges, power stations, airports), which one would expect if there were a well-organized terrorist or secessionist conspiracy. Most confirmed incidents have been directed against Han Chinese security forces, recent Han Chinese émigrés to the region, and even Uyghur Muslims perceived to be too closely collaborating with the Chinese government. Even those who claim that there is active Taliban and al-Qaida coordination of Uyghur violence in the region, have a hard time pointing to violent incidents that resemble al-Qaida

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<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International. “China: Uighur businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer sentenced to eight years' after secret trial” News Service 47/00, AI INDEX: ASA 17/10/00, 10 March 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Although she has yet to be received by the Obama administration, Ms. Kadeer presented testimony on 10 June 2009 to the US Committee on Foreign Affairs, Congressional Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight, entitled: “The Uyghurs: A History of Persecution” <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/111/kad061009.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Freedom of Religion law, Article 36 of the PRC Constitution: “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination”.

techniques, such as sophisticated weaponry, roadside bombs, or even suicide bombings.<sup>11</sup> There has been no confirmed evidence of such violence in the Xinjiang region, with almost all incidents evidencing low-grade weaponry (knives, stones, public buses) and public security targets (police stations, checkpoints, etc.). Most analysts agree that China is not vulnerable to the same ethnic separatism that split the former Soviet Union. But few doubt that should China fall apart, it would divide, like the USSR, along centuries old ethnic, linguistic, regional, and cultural fault lines. If China did break apart, Xinjiang would split in a way that would resemble the conflicts experienced in neighboring regions like modern Kashmir, or the mid-1990s violent civil war of Tajikistan.

### **Xinjiang: a “new region” rooted in the past**

Chinese histories notwithstanding, every Uyghur firmly believes that their ancestors were the indigenous people of the Tarim basin, which did not become known in Chinese as “Xinjiang” (“new dominion”) until the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the identity of the present people known as Uyghur is a rather recent phenomenon related to Great Game rivalries, Sino-Soviet geopolitical maneuverings, and Chinese nation-building. While a collection of nomadic steppe peoples known as the “Uyghur” have existed since before the eighth century, this identity was lost from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. It is one of the world’s least subtle ironies that Chinese histories resolutely assert the long-term dominance of the region by Chinese rulers, yet continue to officially promote the term “Xinjiang” (“New Region”) as the territory’s appellation. This irony is certainly not lost on the Uyghurs, who continue to regard themselves as an internal colony of China, and a rather recent one at that.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of a Uyghur nation, and as an independent state that has roots back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century Uyghur empire, has been further aided by the internet which regularly refers to this romanticized, territorialized past.<sup>13</sup> The Uyghur culture and its people’s genetic make-up, reflect the fact that they migrated from an area that is now in Mongolia to the region now

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<sup>11</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, as cited in “Xinjiang riot hits regional anti-terror nerve”. Xinhua. China Daily. 2009-07-18. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/18/content\\_8445811.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/18/content_8445811.htm). Although Gunaratna, a self-styled terrorism expert with no research experience in China, has claimed direct links between ETIM and al-Qaida, he has yet to offer independent confirmation that the group is still active, or that any of the violence in Xinjiang is connected to global jihadism, other than Chinese sources (see Rohan Gunaratna, 2002. *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*. New York: Columbia University Press).

<sup>12</sup> GLADNEY, Dru C. Internal Colonialism and China’s Uyghur Muslim Minority. *International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World Newsletter*. October, 1: 20-21, 1998 (d). <http://isim.leidenuniv.nl/newsletter/1/regional/01AC23.html>

<sup>13</sup> One of the best examples of this is the website maintained by the ethnomusicologist, Dr. Nathan Light, <http://homepages.utoledo.edu/nlight/uyghpg.htm>

known as Xinjiang or Eastern Turkistan. The region had always been at the center of a “civilizational cross-roads”, involving long-distance travel and inter-mixing by speakers of Iranian, Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, Turkic, Mongolian, and even European tongues. Until their rather belated conversion to Islam (compared to the rather rapid conversion of other Central Asian peoples), the Uyghurs were shamanists, Buddhists, Manichaeans, and even Nestorian Christians. The Uyghur-dominated oases of the region, due to their superior agricultural and mercantile economies, were frequently over-run by nomadic powers from the steppes of Mongolia and Central Asia, and even intermittently, Chinese dynasties who showed interest in controlling the lucrative trade routes across Eurasia. According to Morris Rossabi, it was not until 1760, and after their defeat of the Mongolian Zungars, that the Manchu Qing dynasty exerted full and formal control over the region, establishing it as their “new dominions” (*Xinjiang*), an administration that had lasted barely 100 years, when it fell to the Yakub Beg rebellion (1864–1877) and expanding Russian influence.<sup>14</sup> Until major migrations of Han Chinese was encouraged in the mid-nineteenth century, the Qing were mainly interested in pacifying the region by setting up military outposts which supported a vassal-state relationship. Colonization had begun with the migrations of the Han in the mid-nineteenth century, but was cut short by the Yakub Beg rebellion, the fall of the Qing Empire in 1911, and the ensuing warlord era which dismembered the region until its incorporation as part of the People’s Republic in 1949. Competition for the loyalties of the peoples of the oases in the Great Game played between China, Russia and Britain further contributed to divisions among the Uyghur according to political, religious, and military lines. The peoples of the oases in this region, until the challenge of nation-state incorporation, lacked any coherent sense of identity.

Thus, the incorporation of Xinjiang for the first time into a nation-state required unprecedented delineation of the so-called nations involved. Before its recent re-emergence, the label “Uyghur” was last time used 500 years ago to describe the largely Buddhist population of the Turfan Basin. In spite of this, this label has been in use in the last 80 years as the appellation for the settled Turkic-speaking Muslim oasis dwellers. Its use has never been disputed by the people themselves or the states involved. There is too much at stake for the people labeled as such to wish to challenge that identification. For Uyghur nationalists

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<sup>14</sup> ROSSABI, Morris. “Muslim and Central Asian Revolts” in Jonathan D. Spence & John E. Wills Jr. eds. *From Ming to Ch’ing*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

today, the direct lineal descent from the Uyghur Kingdom in seventh century Mongolia is accepted as fact, despite overwhelming historical and archeological evidence to the contrary.<sup>15</sup>

The end of the Qing dynasty and the rise of Great Game rivalries between China, Russia, and Britain saw the region torn by competing loyalties and marked by two short-lived and drastically different attempts at independence: the proclamations of an “East Turkestan Republic” in Kashgar in 1933 and another in Yining (Ghulje) in 1944.<sup>16</sup> As Linda Benson<sup>17</sup> has extensively documented, these rebellions and attempts at self-rule did little to bridge competing political, religious, and regional differences within the Turkic Muslim people who became officially known as the Uyghur in 1934 under successive Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) warlord administrations. Andrew Forbes<sup>18</sup> describes, in exhaustive detail, the great ethnic, religious, and political cleavages during the period from 1911 to 1949 that pitted Muslim against Chinese, Muslim against Muslim, Uyghur against Uyghur, Hui against Uyghur, Uyghur against Kazak, warlord against commoner, and Nationalist against Communist. There was short-lived independent Uyghur rule during two important periods, which Uyghur today claim provide indisputable evidence of self-governance and even secular-inspired democratic rule. Uyghurs, Uzbeks, and other Central Asian Turkic peoples formed an “Eastern Turkestan Republic” (ETR) in Kashgar for less than a year in 1933, that was inspired by religious, Islamic ideals.

A decade later, the Soviet Union supported another attempt at independent Uyghur rule, establishing a more secular nationalist state, another “Eastern Turkestan Republic” in the northern part of Xinjiang, around the town now known as Yining (where there was a Russian consulate in recognition of this newly formed nation-state). During 1944-45, the ETR fought against the Chinese Nationalists (KMT) who were holding southern Xinjiang. Due to a wartime alliance between the KMT and the Soviets, the Russian eventually pressured the ETR to cooperate with the Chinese, and they formed an uneasy alliance, until the Chinese communists defeated the KMT and occupied the region in 1949, in what they described as a “peaceful liberation” (due to Sino-Soviet cooperation at that time). Uyghur nationalists then

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<sup>15</sup> The best “Uighur nationalist” retelling of this unbroken descent from Karakhorum is in the document from the Eastern Turkestan Union in Europe (cf. references). For a review and critique, including historical evidence for the multi-ethnic background of the contemporary Uighur, see Gladney 1998c; for a discussion of the recent archeological evidence derived from DNA dating of the desiccated corpses of Xinjiang, see Mair 1998.

<sup>16</sup> The best discussion of the politics and importance of Xinjiang during this period is that of an eyewitness and participant, Owen Lattimore (Lattimore 1950).

<sup>17</sup> BENSON, Linda. *The Ili Rebellion: The Moslem Challenge to Chinese Authority in Xinjiang, 1944-1949*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1990.

<sup>18</sup> FORBES, Andrew. *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

had hoped to achieve a semi-independent Republic along the Soviet lines of Uzbekistan and Kazakstan, but they had to settle for recognition as a Chinese “minority nationality” with an Autonomous Region of Xinjiang (with much less juridical authority than the Soviet “union republics”). The extraordinary factionalism and civil disunion during this period which caused large scale depletion of lives and resources in the region, still lives in the minds of the population. Indeed, it is this memory that many argue keeps the region together, a deep-seated fear of widespread social disorder.<sup>19</sup>

Today, despite continued regional differences among three, and perhaps four macro-regions, including the northwestern Zungaria plateau, the southern Tarim basin, the southwest Pamir region, and the eastern Kumul-Turpan-Hami corridor, there are nearly 10 million people spread throughout this vast region that regard themselves as Uyghur, among a total population of 17 million<sup>20</sup>. Many of them dream of, and some agitate for, an independent “Uyghuristan”. The “nationality” policy under the KMT identified five peoples of China, with the Han in the majority. The Uyghur were included at that time under the general rubric of “Hui Muslims”, which then included all Muslim groups in China. This policy was continued under the Communists, eventually recognizing 56 nationalities, the Uyghur and 8 other Muslim groups split out from the general category “Hui” (which was confined to mainly Chinese-speaking Muslims).

The separate nationality designation awarded to the Uyghurs in China continued to mask very considerable regional and linguistic diversity, with the designation also applied to many “non-Uyghur” groups such as the Loplyk and Dolans, that had very little to do with the oasis-based Turkic Muslims that became known as the Uyghur. At the same time, contemporary Uyghur secessionists look back to the brief periods of independent self-rule under Yakub Beg and the Eastern Turkestan Republics, in addition to the earlier glories of the Uyghur kingdoms in Turpan and Karabalghasan, as evidence of their rightful claims to the region. Contemporary Uyghur secessionist organizations based in Istanbul, Ankara, Almaty, Munich, Amsterdam, Melbourne, and Washington may differ in their political goals and strategies for the region, but they all share a common vision of a continuous Uyghur claim on the region, disrupted by Chinese and Soviet intervention. The independence of the former Soviet Central Asian Republics in 1991 has done much to encourage these Uyghur

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<sup>19</sup> James Millward’s history is the best overview of this tumultuous period (Millward 2007).

<sup>20</sup> RUDELSON, Justin Jon. *Oasis Identities: Uighur Nationalism along China’s Silk Road*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

CHEN, Jack. *The Sinkiang Story*. New York: Macmillan, 1977.

GLADNEY, Dru C. The ethnogenesis of the Uighur. *Central Asian Survey*, 1990, 9.1: 1-28.

organizations in their hopes for an independent “Uyghuristan”, despite the fact that the new, mainly Muslim, Central Asian governments all signed protocols with China in Shanghai in the Spring of 1996 that they would not harbor or support secessionist groups. These protocols were reaffirmed in the 25 August 1999 meeting between Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin, committing the “Shanghai Five” nations (China, Russia, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) to respecting border security and suppressing terrorism, drug smuggling, and secessionism.<sup>21</sup> The policy was enforced on 15 June 1999, when three alleged Uyghur secessionists (Hammit Muhammed, Ilyan Zurdin, Khasim Makpur) were deported from Kazakhstan to China, with several others in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan awaiting extradition.<sup>22</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has evolved from what was originally a trade and border settlement alliance to become an increasingly powerful multi-lateral organization with a strong focus on anti-terrorism security cooperation.

That Islam became an important, but not exclusive, cultural marker of Uyghur identity is not surprising given the socio-political oppositions with which the Uyghur were confronted. In terms of religion, the Uyghurs are Sunni Muslims, practicing Islamic traditions similar to their co-religionists in the region. In addition, many of them are Sufi, adhering to branches of *Naqshbandiyya* Central Asian Sufism. Uyghur’s are powerfully attached to their musical traditions, colorful dress, and patronage of saintly tomb complexes (*mazar*).<sup>23</sup> These practices are anathema to the strict Wahhabi-inspired Islamist codes of the Taliban and al-Qaida who severely persecute many Sufi’s and folk artists.

However, it is also important to note that Islam was only one of several unifying markers for Uyghur identity, depending on those with whom they cooperating at the time. This suggests that Islamic fundamentalist groups such as the Taliban in Afghanistan will have only limited appeal among the Uyghur. For example, to the Hui Muslim Chinese in Xinjiang, numbering over 600,000, the Uyghur distinguish themselves as the legitimate autochthonous minority, since both share a belief in Sunni Islam. In contrast to the formerly nomadic Muslim peoples, such as the Kazakh, numbering more than one million, the Uyghur might stress their attachment to the land and oasis of origin. Most profoundly, modern Uyghurs, especially those living in larger towns and urban areas, are marked by their reaction to Chinese influence

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<sup>21</sup> CNN News Service. Rym Brahimi. “Russia, China, and Central Asian Leaders Pledge to Fight Terrorism, Drug Smuggling” 25 August 1999, [www.uygur.org/enorg/wunn99/990825e.html](http://www.uygur.org/enorg/wunn99/990825e.html)

<sup>22</sup> Eastern Turkistan Information Center. “Kasakistan Government Deport Political Refugees to China”. Munich, 15 June 1999. [www.uygur.org/enorg/reports99/990615.html](http://www.uygur.org/enorg/reports99/990615.html)

<sup>23</sup> See the important article by Rahile Dawut a Uyghur female ethno-historian on Uyghur tomb complexes and grave veneration with beautiful color photograph. (Dawut 2009: 56-67). ([http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/newsletter/vol6num2/srjournal\\_v6n2.pdf](http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/newsletter/vol6num2/srjournal_v6n2.pdf))

and incorporation. It is often Islamic traditions that become the focal point for Uyghur efforts to preserve their culture and history. One such popular tradition that has resurfaced in recent years is that of the *Mashrap*, where generally young Uyghurs gather to recite poetry and sing songs (often of folk or religious content), dance, and share traditional foods. These evening events have often become foci for Uyghur resistance to Chinese rule in past years. However, although within the region many portray the Uyghur as united around secessionist or Islamist causes, Uyghur continue to be divided from within by religious conflicts, in this case competing Sufi and non-Sufi factions, territorial loyalties (whether they be oases or places of origin), linguistic discrepancies, commoner-elite alienation, and competing political loyalties. These divided loyalties were evidenced by the attack in May 1996 on the Imam of the Idgah Mosque in Kashgar by other Uyghurs, as well as the assassination of at least six Uyghur officials in September 1997. It is this contested understanding of history that continues to influence much of the current debate over secessionist and Chinese claims to the region. That many of these divided loyalties are beginning to be overcome in the diaspora marks an important development in global Uyghur identity. As Kristian Petersen<sup>24</sup> has noted, the internet has played an increasingly important role in uniting Uyghur sectarianism and factionalism.

## **Han nationalism and the Uyghur**

The Uyghur are an official minority nationality of China, identified as the second largest of ten Muslim peoples in China, primarily inhabiting the Xinjiang Uyghur *Autonomous Region*. Many Uyghur with whom I have spoken in Turfan and Kashgar argue persuasively that they are the autochthonous people of this region. The fact that over 99.8 per cent of the Uyghur population are located in Xinjiang, whereas other Muslim peoples of China have significant populations in other provinces (e.g. the Hui) and outside the country (e.g. the Kazak), contributes to this important sense of belonging to the land. The Uyghur continue to conceive of their ancestors as originating in Xinjiang, claiming to outsiders that “it is our land, our territory”, despite the fact that the early Uyghur kingdom was based in what is now Outer Mongolia and the present region of Xinjiang is under the control of the Chinese State.

Unprecedented socio-political integration of Xinjiang into the Chinese nation-state has taken place in the last 60 years. While Xinjiang has been under Chinese political domination

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<sup>24</sup> PETERSEN, Kristian. “Usurping the Nation: Cyber-Leadership in the Uighur Nationalist Movement” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 2006, 26 (1), p. 66.

since the defeat of the Zungar in 1754, until the middle of the twentieth century it was but loosely incorporated into China proper. The extent of the incorporation of the Xinjiang Region into China is indicated by Chinese policies encouraging Han migration, communication, education, and occupational shifts since the 1940s. Han migration into Xinjiang increased their local population a massive 2,500 per cent between 1940 and 1982, representing an average annual growth of 8.1 per cent, and have maintained an average growth of nearly 5 percent ever since, with a current population of nearly 45 percent. Indeed, many conclude that China's primary programme for assimilating its border regions is a policy of integration through immigration.<sup>25</sup> This was certainly the case for Inner Mongolia, where Mongol population now stands at a mere 17 (rather than 12, according to more recent data) per cent, and given the following figures may well be the case for Xinjiang. The former Party Secretary of Xinjiang from 1994-2010, Wang Lequan, also known as the "stability secretary" for his role in ruthlessly suppressing dissent and fervently executing Beijing's "strike hard campaign", masterminded the unparalleled flooding of Xinjiang with Han migrants from the interior. A native and former vice-governor of Shandong province, many suspect Chairman Wang lost his position as Party Secretary of Xinjiang for his poor handling of the July 2009 riots, although he retained his position in the central Politbyro of the CCP (elevated in 2004).<sup>26</sup>

## **Meager Uyghur efforts at cultural survival**

Integration with China has not been smooth for the Uyghur. Many Uyghur resent the threats to their cultural survival and have resorted to violence. After denying the existence of conflicts for decades and stressing instead China's "national unity", official reports have detailed Tibetan and Muslim conflict activities in the border regions of Tibet, Yunnan, Xinjiang, Ningxia, and Inner Mongolia. With the March 1997 bus bombings in Beijing, widely attributed (though this has never been verified) to Uyghur secessionists, coupled with the Urumqi bus bombings on the day of Deng Xiaoping's 1997 memorial on 25 February, Beijing can no longer keep them secret. The Yining uprising on 7 February 1997, which left at least nine dead and hundreds injured, with seven Uyghur suspects arrested and most probably slated for execution, was widely covered by the world's media. This distinguishes

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<sup>25</sup> For China's minority integration program, see Mackerras 1994.

<sup>26</sup> Edward Wong and Jonathan Ansfield, "China Replaces Leader of the Restive Xinjiang Region" *The New York Times* May 15, 2010: A10; Michael Wines, "A Strongman is China's Rock in Ethnic Strife" *The New York Times* July 10, 2009: A11; Gladney 2004: 378-85.

these last few events from on-going problems in the region in the mid-1980s that met with little media coverage. In 1996, the *Xinjiang Daily* reported five serious incidents since February 1996, with a crackdown that rounded up 2,773 terrorist suspects, 6,000 lbs of explosives, and 31,000 rounds of ammunition. Overseas Uyghur groups have claimed that over 10,000 were arrested in the round-up, with over 1,000 killed. The largest protest which took place from 2 to 8 February 1996, was sparked by a Chinese raid on an evening *Mashrap* cultural meeting. Protests against the arrests made during the meeting led to 120 deaths and over 2,500 arrests. On 2 March 1996 the pro-government *mullah* of Kashgar's Idgah mosque and his son were stabbed by knife-wielding Uyghur militants, on 27 May there was another attack on a senior government official, and in September of the same year six Uyghur government officials were killed by other Uyghurs in Yecheng.

The government responded severely in the late 1990s with a widespread arrests and new policy announcements. In Spring 1998, the National People's Congress passed a New Criminal Law that redefined "counter-revolutionary" crimes to be "crimes against the state", liable to severe prison terms and even execution. Included in "crimes against the state" were any actions considered to involve "ethnic discrimination" or "stirring up anti-ethnic sentiment". Many human rights activists have argued that this is a thinly veiled attempt to criminalize "political" actions and to make them appear as illegal as traffic violations, supporting China's claims that it holds "no political prisoners". Since any minority activity could be regarded as stirring "anti-ethnic feeling", many ethnic activists are concerned that the New Criminal Law will be easily turned against them.

Chinese authorities are correct that increasing international attention to the plight of indigenous border peoples have put pressure on the regions. Notably, the formerly elected chair of the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization (UNPO) based in the Hague was the Uyghur, Erkin Alptekin, son of the Uyghur nationalist leader, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, who died in Istanbul in December 1995 where there is now a park dedicated to his memory. There are numerous international organizations working for the independence of Xinjiang [under the name of Eastern Turkestan], based in Amsterdam, Munich, Istanbul, Melbourne, Washington DC, and New York. An organization that seeks to coordinate these disparate movements is the World Uyghur Congress, formed in 2004 with Erkin Alptekin as President. In its Washington, DC, meeting from May 21-25, 2006, the Congress elected Madam Rebiya

Kadeer as President (<http://www.uyghurcongress.org>). Although, as Chung<sup>27</sup> has noted, the WUC is merely an umbrella organization uniting for the first time a large number of disparate Uyghur diaspora organizations in a democratic format, the Chinese government has nevertheless labeled the WUC as a “terrorist organization” (Mackerras 2007: 101). The official position of the WUC, which is growing in influence among Uyghur communities and organizations across the globe, is to push for real autonomy and not demand independence or secession at this time, along the same lines as the Tibetan Government in Exile.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly, since Xinjiang is the last Muslim region under communism, the international support for the WUC and Uyghur independence is of more concern to Chinese authorities than is the international support for Tibetan independence.

The important question is: why do the Chinese authorities call such attention to these Tibetan and Muslim activities and external organizations? From 1998 to 2008, there was a decade without a single incident of Uyghur-related violence. The Istanbul-based groups have existed since the 1950s, and the Dalai Lama has been active since his exile in 1959. Secessionist actions have taken place on a small but regular basis since the expansion of market and trade policies in China, and with the opening of overland gateways to Xinjiang in addition to the trans-Eurasian railway since 1991, there seems to be no chance of closing up shop. In his 1994 visit to the newly independent nations of Central Asia, Li Peng called for the opening of a “new Silk Road”. This was a clear attempt to calm fears in the newly established Central Asian states over Chinese expansionism, as was the April 1996 Shanghai communiqué that solidified the existing Sino-Central Asian borders. Documented separatist and violent incidents in Xinjiang had dropped off dramatically since the late 1990s. In July 14, 2002 *Washington Post* (2002) interview Philip Pan reported that local Xinjiang security officials were only able to cite three relatively small occurrences. Beijing’s official publication of the secessionist issue may have more to do with domestic politics than any real internal or external threat. Recent moves such as evidenced in the 2008 Olympics suggest efforts to promote Chinese nationalism as a “unifying ideology” that will prove more attractive than communism and more manageable than capitalism. By highlighting secessionist threats and external intervention, China can divert attention away from its own

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<sup>27</sup> Chung, Chien-peng. “Confronting Terrorism and Other Evils in China: All Quiet on the Western Front?” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*. 2006, 4(2), 75—87.

<sup>28</sup> See the position of the World Uyghur Congress at <http://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/?cat=1>. The Globalsecurity.org report on “Uyghur militants” states unequivocally that with regard to the World Uyghur Congress, it is “a nonviolent and peaceful opposition movement against Chinese occupation of East Turkestan...” with an “unconditional rejection of totalitarianism, religious intolerance and terrorism as an instrument of policy” (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/uyghur.htm>).

domestic challenges of natural disasters (especially the 2008 Sichuan earthquake), economic crises (such as the Asian economic downturn's drag on China's currency), rising inflation, increased income disparity, displaced "floating populations", Taiwan reunification, and the many other internal and external problems facing the Chinese Communist Party leadership. Perhaps nationalism will be the only "unifying ideology" left to a Chinese nation that has begun to distance itself from Communism, as it has from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in the past. This is perhaps why religiously-based nationalisms, like Islamic fundamentalism and Tibetan Buddhism, are targeted by Beijing, while the rise of shamanism and popular religion goes nearly unchecked. At the same time, a firm lid on Muslim activism in China sends a message to foreign Muslim militant organizations to stay out of China's internal affairs, and the Taliban to stay well within their Afghan borders. Although it is hard to gauge the extent of support for Uyghur secessionism and separatism among the broader population, it is clear that cultural survival is a critical concern for many, and a significant attempt to preserve Uyghur culture is taking place, assisted to some extent by international tourism and the state's attempts to demonstrate its goodwill toward its restive Muslim population.

### **Territorializing the Uyghur future**

To an extent never seen before, the continued incorporation of Xinjiang into China has become inexorable, and perhaps irreversible. The need for the oil and mineral resources of the region since China became an oil importing nation in 1993 means that Chinese influence will only grow. To be sure, the Uyghur are still oriented culturally and historically toward Central Asia in terms of religion, language, and ethnic custom, and interaction has increased in recent years due to the opening of the roads to Pakistan and Almaty. China has also recently discussed opening the border between Afghanistan and Xinjiang via the ancient Wakhan Corridor, where there is no road but only an ancient donkey trail used since Silk Road days.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, pan-Turkism was appealing to some, but not all, Uyghurs during the early part of this century. Historical ties to Central Asia are strong. Turkey's late Prime Minister Turgut Ozal espoused a popular Turkish belief when, on his first state visit to Beijing in 1985, which sought to open a consulate there, he commented that the Turkish nation originated in what is now China. Yet separatist notions, given the current political incorporation of Xinjiang into

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<sup>29</sup> See the Stratfor paper documenting the Afghan Prime Minister's request for China to open the Wakhan corridor, June 11, 2009, "China: Afghan FM Seeks Wakhan Corridor Supply Route", [http://www.stratfor.com/sitreps/20090611\\_china\\_afghan\\_fm\\_seeks\\_wakhan\\_corridor\\_supply\\_route](http://www.stratfor.com/sitreps/20090611_china_afghan_fm_seeks_wakhan_corridor_supply_route)

China, while perhaps present, are not practicable. They remain visions of a virtual community, but a community that is nevertheless becoming better organized and more audible in its message broadcast to those inside and outside of China. In his prescient article, Dale Eickelman<sup>30</sup> noted that the new social media were beginning to transform the heretofore isolated authoritarian and reform-resistant regimes of the Middle East. Why should China be immune to these global trends? As noted above, much of what is written about China is predicated on the assumption that China as a nation holds together. But, if China should fail at the centre, or the Great Wall of information-control should be breached, the peripheries will certainly destabilize, with Xinjiang and Tibet having the strongest prospects for secession given their cultural unity and attempts at government-in-exile, as substantially augmented by the networking and community-building power of the internet and social networks.

The problems facing Xinjiang, however, are much greater than those of Tibet if it were to become independent. Not only is Xinjiang more integrated into the rest of China, but the Uyghur part of the population is less than half of the total and primarily located in the south, where there is less industry and natural resources, except for oil. As noted above, however, unless significant investment is found, Tarim oil and energy resources will never be a viable source of independent wealth. Poor past relations between the three main Muslim groups, Uyghur, Kazakh, and Hui, suggest that conflicts among Muslims would be as great as those between Muslims and Han Chinese. Most local residents believe that independence would lead to significant conflicts between these groups, along ethnic, religious, urban-rural, and territorial lines. Given the harsh climate and poor resources in the region, those caught in the middle would have few places to flee. Xinjiang Han would naturally seek to return to the interior of China, since Russia and Mongolia would be in no position to receive them. Yet given the premise that only a complete collapse of the state could precipitate a viable independence movement and internal civil war in Xinjiang, there would be few places the Han would be able to go. Certainly, the bordering provinces of Gansu and Qinghai would be just as disrupted, and Tibet would not be an option. Uyghur refugees would most likely seek to move south, since the north would be dominated by the Han and the western routes would be closed off by Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. That leaves only the southern routes, and with the exception of Pakistan, no nation in the region would probably be equipped to receive them. Certainly, they would not be better off in present-day Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

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<sup>30</sup> EICKELMAN, Dale F. 2. New Media in the Arab Middle East and the Emergence of Open Societies. In: *Remaking Muslim Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2009. p. 37-59.

Given the on-going conflicts in Kashmir, even Pakistan, the most likely recipient of Uyghur refugees, would probably not wish further destabilization of the region. Note also that the main southern route to India and Pakistan, along the Karakorum highway through the Torghurat pass, is generally passable less than six months out of the year. India, despite its poor relations with China, would probably not want to add to its Muslim population. During many conversations in Xinjiang with local residents, Muslim and Han alike, it became clear that this is a well-known fact. Most think that in such a worst-case scenario, there would be nothing to do but stay and fight.

In terms of religious freedom, as with many other policies, the Chinese constitution is laudable when honored. However, in a country where the rule of law often gives way to local and national politics, it is often only honored in the breach. As long as religion is perceived by Chinese officials as a threat to Chinese sovereignty, mosques and religious practice will be closely monitored and in some cases restricted. In light of international Islamic interest, however, Chinese officials have to be careful regarding any oppressive treatment of religious practice – especially if casting it as “splittist” or seditious, as in the February 1997 incident in Ili.

The history of Chinese-Muslim relations in Xinjiang, as Millward’s (2007) book documented, has been one of relative peace and quiet, broken by enormous social and political disruptions, fostered by both internal and external crises. The opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang has not reached the level of Syria, Yemen, Chechnya or the Intifada, but similar to the Basque separatists of the ETA in Spain, or former IRA in Ireland and England, it is one that may erupt in limited, violent moments of terror and resistance. And just as these conflicts have not been resolved in the Middle East, North Africa, or Europe, the Uyghur problem in Xinjiang does not appear to be one that will readily go away. Nor are Uyghur in the diaspora able to engage with the region and participate regularly in its reform or development. To paraphrase Sean Roberts, unlike many Middle Easterners who regularly visit their homelands, Uyghur who are “waiting for Uyghuristan” must do their waiting and imagining on the internet, as expatriots are not allowed to visit the region. The admitted problem of Uyghur terrorism and dissent, even in the diaspora, is thus problematic for a government that wants to encourage integration and development in a region where the majority population are not only ethnically different, but also devoutly Muslim. How does a government integrate a strongly religious minority (be it Muslim, Tibetan, Christian, or Buddhist) into a “market-Leninist” system? China’s policy of intolerance toward dissent and

economic stimulus has not seemed to have resolved this issue. Given events on the western end of the Eurasian continent, China should find ways to open dialogue with representative Uyghur individuals and groups to better cooperate in finding solutions to this on-going problem. There has been much progress and relatively peaceful development of this important region. Surely a dialogue can be opened up in order to help insure a more prosperous and peaceful future, for both Uyghur and Han alike.

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