

An Emergent Cycle of Violence: Han-Uyghur Tensions in Today's Xinjiang

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The article is dedicated to the analysis of relations between the Han and Uyghur ethnic groups in Xinjiang, China's largest administrative division. A thorough research of their perceptual and actual real-life clashes aims to better explain the causes behind the recent and still ongoing five-year period (2009-2014) of increased inter-ethnic violence and instability in the region. It shows that Xinjiang's two most populous communities have largely conflicting identities and enjoy unequal positions within the state and society. As the Han are China's dominant and privileged majority, the Uyghurs are its most restless and marginalized minority. During the last five years radical Uyghurs have increasingly directed their resentment towards the Han neighbours as opposed to previously dominant practice of clashing with representatives of the government. The Han reacted with their own violent organized protests against both the Uyghurs and the regime. As a result, the latter is increasingly caught in the middle between demands of both groups, as opposed to its previous reliance on the Han settlers and their descendants.

Keywords: China, Xinjiang, Uyghurs, Han, ethnic tensions, ethnic violence

Today People's Republic of China (China) is universally recognized as a would-be superpower by almost all relevant criteria. This perception has only been reinforced by American costly and somewhat incoherent military involvement in the Muslim world at the beginning of the 21st century. However, this does not mean that Beijing has no crucial issues yet to be solved to achieve its global ambitions. In fact, some of these derive from within the country itself and are intimately related to the problems that the United States are

still trying to deal with across Eurasia. Arguably, one of the most important of such challenges is the increasingly complicated security situation in China's western provinces with already visible impact even beyond them.

The whole country experienced a deep shock at the beginning of March 2014, as 29 people were killed and more than 140 others injured by a group of knife-wielding terrorists attacking civilians at the railway station in the southern city of Kunming, Yunnan province. One of the country's newspapers dubbed it

China's "9/11".¹ However, it was only the latest attack perpetrated by "Xinjiang extremists", by implication ethnic Uyghurs (Uighurs) who once formed the majority in this westernmost region of the country. At the end of October 2013 a four-wheel car with Xinjiang number plate crashed into a crowd just behind the iconic portrait of Mao Zedong at Beijing's Tiananmen Square, the heavily-guarded symbolic centre of Communist Party power, killing two tourists and injuring at least 38 civilians as a result.²

These two attacks reveal that Xinjiang-related indiscriminate violence is spreading beyond the distant region which experiences similar outbreaks on a relatively regular basis. Indeed, one could argue that China's most restive province has not fully recovered from the infamous riots that shook its capital Ürümqi five years ago. In mid-summer of 2009 Uyghur protests broke out in the region's largest city, followed by the rampage which saw 197 people killed, over 1700 injured, 331 shops and 1325 motor vehicles destroyed or burned, according to figures later released by the government.³ Analysts call these riots Xinjiang's most serious clashes since the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) or even the founding of the People's Republic in 1949.⁴ Certainly,



Emin Minaret and Mosque in Turpan, one of the prime examples of Uyghur architecture (author's personal archive)

it was the first major outbreak of violence after a dozen years of relative peace which emerged after the brutal suppression of protests in Ghulja (Yining/Ili) in 1997.⁵

Respected scholars point out that in 2009 China's position in Xinjiang seemed to be more secure than at any previous time in the 60-year history of the People's Republic. Its sovereignty over the region was not challenged by any other state, territorial disputes with the Central Asian neighbours had largely been settled and their bilateral trade blossomed, while Xinjiang itself had experienced substantial economic development.⁶ However, only five years later the influential Economist magazine seemed to have enough evidence to claim that scarcely a week passed in the province without anti-government violence.⁷ Thus, a research

1 Martin Patience, "Making sense of the unrest from China's Xinjiang." BBC, 3 March 2014. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-26414016>> [accessed 11 March 2014].

2 BBC, "Tiananmen crash: China police 'detain suspects.'" BBC, 30 October 2013. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-24742810>> [accessed 11 March 2014].

3 James A. Millward, "Introduction: Does the 2009 Urumqi Violence Mark a Turning Point?" *Central Asian Survey*, 28 (4), 2009, pp. 347-360, 352.

4 Hao Yufan and Liu Weihua, "Xinjiang: Increasing Pain in the Heart of China's Borderland." *Journal of*

Contemporary China, 74 (21), 2012, pp. 205-225, 205.

5 Millward, p. 349.

6 Michael Clarke, "China, Xinjiang, and the Internationalization of the Uyghur Issue." *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 22 (2), 2010, pp. 213-229, 214.

7 The Economist, "The burden of empire." *The Economist*, 6 March 2014. <<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21598647-after-brutal-attack-china-communist-party-needs-change-its-policies-towards>> [accessed 12 March 2014].

about the causes, development and likely consequences of this formidable shift is both understandable and necessary.

In the present article I attempt to highlight some of the most important trends behind the recent five-year period of increased instability inside the province. Indeed, the 2009-2014 time-frame has been marked by growing tensions between the Uyghur and ethnic Chinese (Han) communities, while resentment against the government has become a trait that both of them eagerly demonstrate. These trends present qualitatively new and formidable challenges to the authorities, caught in the middle between increasingly desperate Uyghur militant activities and radicalized Han demands for response to terror and perceived injustice. Fragile inter-ethnic relationships inside Xinjiang have been gradually breaking apart as bloody ethnic clashes between both communities supplemented their animosity towards the authorities. Beijing's contemporary policies in the region seem to be inadequate if it really wants Xinjiang to become a prosperous, multicultural land with genuine autonomy. Failure to do so could easily unleash destructive dynamics even beyond the province itself, as recent events perfectly showed. However, one ought to start the analysis from explaining the sources of all these tensions.

Locating Xinjiang in Space and Time

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) is China's largest administrative division, covering about one-sixth of the country's territory, or equal to the combined area of France, Germany, the United King-

dom, Spain and Italy.⁸ It borders eight out of fourteen China's neighbours, including the restive Afghanistan and Pakistan. In fact, Xinjiang's 5,600 km borderline is the longest among all frontier provinces, constituting a quarter of China's total land border which happens to be the longest worldwide.⁹ The autonomous region lies at the centre of the Eurasian continent, separated from both the foreign countries and China-proper by imposing mountain ranges, deserts and steppes. Tellingly, Xinjiang's modern capital of Ürümqi is the most remote city from any sea in the world, and ancient Kashgar (Kashi) is China's westernmost city, located closer to Damascus than to Beijing. The province has two major geographical regions: Dzungarian grasslands in the north and Tarim Basin in the south with a huge Taklamakan desert in the middle, that are separated by Tian Shan (or heavenly mountains). The majority of Xinjiang's population is concentrated in a number of oases and towns, while surrounding inhospitable terrain is rich in strategic natural resources, such as hydrocarbons and many minerals. Ürümqi and Kashgar are the largest cities in Dzungaria and Tarim Basin respectively.

Due to its relative isolation and harsh living conditions, Xinjiang with its officially counted 22 million inhabitants (2010) is among China's least densely inhabited provinces, behind only the neighbouring Tibet and Qinghai. Although this figure does not include a huge number of seasonal migrant

8 Yitzhak Shichor, "Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang," *Asian Affairs*, 32 (2), 2005, pp. 119-135, 125.

9 Hao and Liu, p. 209.

workers mostly from the Han heartland, the local population nonetheless presents a tremendous variety. As its official name plainly suggests, Xinjiang was perceived as an autonomy primarily for the Uyghur people, who comprise less than a half of its inhabitants (43.3%), the rest including a huge portion of Han (41%) and sizable minorities of Muslim Kazakh (8.3%) and Hui (5%) people. In reality, due to the seasonal and migrational character of Xinjiang's labour market, the Han undoubtedly form the absolute majority of its population. Among the ten China's officially recognized Muslim-majority "nationalities", six reside in the province, and four have their nation-states across the Central Asian border. Due to such diversity, it is the country's only autonomous region with further autonomies on three lower administrative levels, those of prefecture, county and township. In fact, these divisions comprise more than a half of the province's area, and are widely believed to be designed to further dilute the already meagre influence of the nominally titular Uyghur nationality.¹⁰

Since the end of the Cold War Xinjiang had long retained its unique status as the last Muslim-majority region ruled by a communist regime worldwide. Although the Han growth has recently put this trait into question, the province retains its dual identity of being both "Central Asia in China" and "China in Central Asia"¹¹, thus once again demonstrating an intimate relationship be-



Silk Road Monument in Kashgar with its Old Town in the background (author's personal archive)

tween geography and history. Indeed, Beijing claims that Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of the country since the Han dynasty (206 BC-220AD), a period essential for the development of both Chinese state and national identity (thus the same name for the dominant ethnic group itself). In reality, due to its relative isolation, unique geopolitical position on "Eurasian crossroads" and continuous ethno-cultural dominance of indigenous Turkic and Mongol peoples, this huge territory on the two-millennia-old Silk Road mostly remained beyond imperial China's control. It has only been since the Qing dynasty's (1644-1912) conquest of the region in the mid-eighteenth century that China-based states have been able to consolidate their control over it for an extended period.¹² In fact, the empire's last dynasty itself was an ethnic Manchu regime, culturally much closer to Xinjiang's indigenous inhabitants than the also subjugated Han Chinese had ever been. This, however, has not prevented local separatism.

Since the mid-nineteenth century there have been three serious attempts to establish an independent state in the region. The

¹⁰ Gardner Bovington, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 44-46.

¹¹ David Kerr, "Central Asian and Russian Perspectives on China's Strategic Emergence." *International Affairs*, 86 (1), 2010, pp. 127-152, 140.

¹² Clarke, p. 215.

Kashgarian monarchy (c. 1864-1877), led by a Tajik adventurer Yaqub Beg, was followed by Manchu re-conquest and eventual formal incorporation of the whole area as an imperial province with the locally disliked name of “Xinjiang” (new borderland or dominion in Chinese).¹³ Similarly, the First (1933-1934) and the Second (1944-1949) East Turkestan republics, both applying a locally venerated name and based in Kashgar and Ghulja respectively, were also crushed by their contemporary foes from China proper. Ever since Xinjiang was “peacefully liberated” by the People’s Liberation Army in 1949, Beijing’s approach to the region has been defined by its integration with the “motherland”. The consolidation of China’s territorial control and sovereignty over the province has been complemented by continuous efforts to absorb politically, economically and culturally the various non-Han indigenous ethnic groups into the “anti-imperialist” People’s Republic.¹⁴ By far the most numerous Uyghurs have soon become the greatest obstacle to this project, while a constantly growing community of immigrants from China-proper has emerged as its principal driving force. A brief comparative analysis of their identities would allow us to better understand both their grievances and motives for violence that are to be examined later.

The “Other” and Han-Uyghur Conflicting Identities

The Uyghur population is the fifth largest among all Turkic ethnic groups worldwide, outnumbering such established brethren

nations as Turkmens, Tatars or Kyrgyz. The majority of Uyghurs share a deep and intimate attachment to their homeland, defiantly called “Uyghuristan” or “Eastern Turkestan” instead of “Xinjiang”, and firmly believe that their ancestors were the indigenous people of the Tarim Basin. As Uyghur physical traits are easily distinguishable from the characteristically East Asian Han, with even blond or red hair and hazel or blue eyes not being uncommon, some convinced nationalists would claim their ancestry to Indo-European, as opposed to purely Turkic ancient people, referring to the Europoid Tarim mummies that date back to the second millennium BC.¹⁵ Even more Uyghurs allege their descent from the Xiongnu people, an arch-nemesis of the Han dynasty,¹⁶ and all trace their statehood back to medieval Uyghur Khaganate, or empire, that controlled much of Central Asia from 744 to 848.¹⁷

Being a Turkic ethnic group, Uyghurs have a developed language of their own associated with a rather impressive literary tradition. Although many struggle to communicate in Chinese, thus adding to the widely held Han perception of their backwardness,¹⁸ the use of Arabic script both attaches them to

13 Bovingdon, p. 24.

14 Clarke, p. 215.

15 J. Todd Reed and Diana Raschke, *The ETIM: China’s Islamic Militants and the Global Terrorist Threat*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010, p. 7.

16 Bovingdon, p. 27.

17 Dru C. Gladney, “Islam and Modernity in China: Secularization or Separatism?” in Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (ed.), *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2008, pp. 179-205, 198.

18 Blaine Kaltman, *Under the Heel of the Dragon: Islam, Racism, Crime, and the Uighur in China*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007, p. 2.

the Western parts of Asia and gives a natural advantage in studying the foundational language of Islam¹⁹. Indeed, the world's second largest and the fastest growing religion has left an indelible imprint in Uyghur identity. Although the vast majority of them are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhhab*), one should not overemphasize religion to such an extent that China's authorities usually do.

Despite their frequent claims to be practicing “true Islam”, various Sufi and local pre-Islamic influences have rather created a culturally distinct and rich Uyghur “folk Islam” with particular role provided to music, dance and poetry, especially apparent during unique traditional male gatherings (*meshrep*). Neither is their “golden period” in history associated with Islam. Indeed, the much-revered Uyghur Khaganate officially adopted Manichaeism, while most of later oasis kingdoms in the region were Buddhist. The majority of Uyghurs have been converted to Islam only in the 15th century, and the process has not even been fully completed, for some of them after the fall of the Khaganate fled as far to the east as to eventually avoid Muslim influences and remain Buddhist. Today their descendants are known as “Yugurs” or “Yellow Uyghurs”, and numbering about 15,000 people, are officially recognized as a separate nationality granted an autonomous county in Gansu Province.²⁰ These facts, however, should



Remains of Ordu-Baliq, the capital of the first Uyghur Khaganate, in present-day Mongolia (author's personal archive)

not be seen as denying the essential role of Islam for the majority of contemporary Uyghurs. Despite quite justifiable scholarly claims that their identity was lost from the 15th to the 20th centuries,²¹ today it is both viable and closely attached to the land, its history and religion.

The Han Chinese ethnic group would probably represent the most extreme identity contrast to the Uyghur people. Forming by far the largest population worldwide, it is characterized by considerable genetic, linguistic and cultural diversity, mainly due to thousands of years of immigration and assimilation of separate regional ethnicities and tribes within today's China. Arguably, there is only one important similarity between Han and Uyghur identities – both of them emerged in a modern sense comparatively recently, the late 19th century usually cited as the earliest period.²² Historically to become Chinese meant to rid one of barbaric lifestyles and take

19 Jean A. Berlie, *Islam in China: Hui and Uyghurs between Modernization and Sinicization*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2004, p. 32.

20 Michael Dillon, “China's Islamic Frontiers: Borders and Identities.” *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, Winter 2000-2001, pp. 97-104, 103.

21 Dru C. Gladney, “Islam in China: State Policing and Identity Politics.” in Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank (eds.), *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 151-178, 166.

22 Bovingdon, p. 12.

on the fundamentals of civilization defined by “everlasting” empire, the “Middle Kingdom” (*zhongguo*) of the world ruling “all under heaven” (*tianxia*) from the seat of the “Son of Heaven” (*tianzi*). Hence, even contemporary Han nationalism should be understood as more than ethnicity, more than race, but something closer to “culture” or “civilization”.²³

The Sino-centric “civilizing mission” has become a principal feature of Beijing’s policies in Xinjiang, while the constantly growing local Han population emerged as the main beneficiary and guarantor of their success. The vast majority of them are descendants of recent settlers from various parts of China-proper or have themselves immigrated to the province in search of economic opportunities. Indeed, according to the official data, the demographic share of the Han quickly increased from a meagre 6.1 per cent of Xinjiang’s permanent population in 1953²⁴ to the already mentioned share of 41 per cent or 8.5 million in 2010. These figures omit not only seasonal migrants, but also members of the Han-dominated Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (*bingtuan*, XPCC), a 60 years-old, 2.6 million-strong state-run organization with roots in the military controlling an area twice the size of Taiwan across the province, and suitably called “a state within a state” by the Economist magazine.²⁵

23 Brandon Barbour and Reece Jones, “Criminals, Terrorists, and Outside Agitators: Representational Tropes of the ‘Other’ in the 5 July Xinjiang, China Riots.” *Geopolitics*, 18 (1), 2013, pp. 95-114, 102.

24 Isabelle Côté, “Political Mobilization of a Regional Minority: Han Chinese Settlers in Xinjiang.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34 (11), 2011, pp. 1855-1873, 1859.

25 The Economist, “Settlers in Xinjiang: circling the wagons.” *The Economist*, 25 May 2013. <<http://www.economist.com/news/china/21578433-region->

In fact, the whole process of Han migration to China’s autonomous regions is called “one of the few contemporary examples of ongoing, and ever-increasing, large-scale resettlement of a dominant group” in the world.²⁶

Arguably Xinjiang’s permanent Han population could be seen as different in some important facets from their co-nationals from China-proper. In contrast to their ancestors, many of those who were born or raised in the region share attachment to it and do not want to leave for the Han heartland. Some even claim that since previous Chinese imperial dynasties “owned” Xinjiang before the Uyghur Khaganate, the region rightfully belongs to them. The Han have their own venerable sites there, such as the Flaming Mountains (*huoyanshan*) east of the ancient Uyghur city of Turpan (Tulufan) which were famously depicted in the immensely popular *Journey to the West* (*xiyouji*), one of the four great classical novels of Chinese literature. Moreover, Xinjiang’s Han seem to be a privileged group only as long as they continue to perform their “civilizing” role inside the province. Outside of it, all people holding Xinjiang household registration (*hukou*) feel like an underclass with some restrictions being the same for Uyghur, Han or Hui. The value of these Han decreases sharply as they move east. These policies aim both to attract new settlers from the core of China and to retain the old ones inside.²⁷

As a result, the two largest ethnic groups in contemporary Xinjiang largely identify

plagued-ethnic-strife-growth-immigrant-dominat-ed-settlements-adding> [accessed 16 March 2014].

26 Côté, p. 1859.

27 Thomas Cliff, “The Partnership of Stability in Xinjiang: State-Society Interactions Following the July 2009 Unrest.” *The China Journal*, 68, 2012, pp. 79-105, 104.

themselves in relationship to each other. The Han present their community as peaceful, civilized and law-abiding members of Chinese society in contrast to the “criminal” Uyghur,²⁸ while the latter refer to their indigenous status and rich civilization as being threatened by the hordes of “faithless colonists” from the alien east. To some authors, Islam’s advances in Xinjiang are attributed precisely to the fact that it embodies a crucial point of difference between the “locals” and the “strangers.”²⁹ Indeed, despite an impressive history of peaceful coexistence by peoples of different faith, a sense of mutual distrust between various Muslim and non-Muslim communities remains to be a substantial problem in the whole of China, and especially so in Xinjiang. Its Muslims in general and Uyghurs in particular have to live amid an ever-expanding mass of people who are “largely pork-eating, polytheist, secularist and heathen,”³⁰ while themselves defiantly maintaining a different calendar, celebrating their own religious festivals, and speaking of the opportunity to visit a distant foreign land (*hajj*) as the greatest duty one may have.³¹

This process of mutual “othering” has gradually transformed into the *de facto* Han-Uyghur segregation apparent in political, socio-economic, geographical and even



Flaming Mountains near Turpan (author’s personal archive)

temporal dimensions across Xinjiang. In reality, the difference between these groups is not only of ethnicity and religion but also that between the rulers and the ruled.³² Corresponding to an established practice in all autonomous regions, the governor of Xinjiang has always been from the titular nationality. However, the real power lies within the secretary of the local party committee, a post reserved exclusively for the Han.³³ As the main beneficiary of state-directed economic development in Xinjiang, they have achieved demographic precedence in its most urban and industrialized regions.³⁴ Hence, the majority of Uyghurs live in the southern Tarim Basin, while northern, resource-rich and more urbanized Dzungaria is populated mainly by the Han, Kazakh and Hui communities. Even within most oasis cities and towns there is a clear pattern of spatial segregation between the indigenous Old Town and the immigrant New Town.³⁵

28 Barbour and Jones, p. 105.

29 Hasan H. Karrar, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy: China’s Central Asian Foreign Policy since the Cold War*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009, p. 32.

30 Dru C. Gladney, “Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism?” *The China Quarterly*, 174, 2003, pp. 451-467, 451.

31 Richard C. DeAngelis, “Muslims and Chinese Political Culture.” *The Muslim World*, 87 (2), 1997, pp. 151-168, 157-158.

32 Karrar, p. 29.

33 Bovingdon, p. 16.

34 Côté, p. 1861.

35 Joanne N. Smith, „‘Making Culture Matter’: Symbolic, Spatial and Social Boundaries between Uyghurs and Han Chinese.” *Asian Ethnicity*, 3 (2), 2002, pp. 153-174, 163.

The Uyghurs deliberately draw additional boundaries with the Han using such means as food, dress and time. As both communities value dietary culture very much, correspondent Islamic prohibitions have become a contentious issue. As if their bodily and facial differences would not be enough, Uyghurs distinguish themselves by their clothing. While women tend to cover their hair according to Islamic practices, Uyghur men pride themselves in growing a beard and wearing a beautifully decorated square skullcap (*doppa*), thus showing common heritage with their Uzbek ethnic brethren. Even more symbolically, Uyghurs defiantly use local “Xinjiang time” which has a geographically coherent two-hour lag behind China’s supposedly single official “Beijing time”.³⁶ Unfortunately, all these differences have become a stepping stone for further, more specific grievances that eventually led to serious outbreaks of violence.

Government Policies and Han-Uyghur Grievances

Beijing’s key goal of Xinjiang’s integration with the “motherland” has remained subject to its local peculiarities. During the Cold War central authorities strived to consolidate their control by the means of administrative integration to overcome sharp geographical barriers, cultural assimilation to deal with people’s diversity, economic penetration to break traditional local institutions and practices, and international isolation to counter imminent external threats from the USSR, India and non-state Islamists from

³⁶ Ibid, p. 161.

Pakistan and Afghanistan. All of these when necessary were backed by police and military force. Economically side-lined for decades, resource-rich Xinjiang re-emerged as a focus of governmental policies in the reform era, especially after the Cold War.³⁷ Since the 1990s China’s local strategy has rested upon a developmental “double-opening” approach: to simultaneously integrate Xinjiang with the Han heartland and newly-independent Central Asia in economic terms and to establish security cooperation with the latter to prevent any threats from within the province.³⁸ Indeed, the birth of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is largely explained by these same motives.

The dawn of the 21st century was marked by China’s launch of its multi-billion “Western development” (*xibu dakaiifa*) policies with crucial role assigned to Xinjiang envisaged to become an industrial and agricultural base and a trade and energy corridor for the national economy. By that time, the province had already turned into the country’s most important energy base due to its own fossil fuel deposits as well as geographical and cultural links to hydrocarbon-rich Central Asia and the Middle East.³⁹ Currently the long-cherished vision of a “New Silk Road” is beginning to acquire practical shape due to such engineering wonders as the Karakoram Highway connecting Kashgar to Hasan Abdal in Pakistan, and the Lanzhou-Ürümqi High-Speed Railway (*gaotie*), both being the highest equivalent transport arteries in the world.

³⁷ Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China’s Search for Security*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 205-206.

³⁸ Clarke, pp. 215-216.

³⁹ Hao and Liu, p. 211.

Moreover, the strategically located city of Kashgar was given a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) status in 2010. Remarkably, it was only the fifth SEZ in China and its first outside the country's coast. However, the goal of fast-track economic development was complemented with political tightening, especially apparent in the two so-called "Strike Hard" (*yan da*) campaigns.⁴⁰ The analysis of more specific Uyghur and Han grievances towards each other and the government would allow us to evaluate the real impact of all these policies on Xinjiang's social stability.

Contrary to Beijing's expectations, many Uyghurs consider themselves to be the biggest losers of China's reform era in general and its regional development projects in particular.⁴¹ To them the present growth model amounts to extraction of natural riches from Xinjiang and the massive Han immigration into it. The best jobs seem to go to the recent arrivals or their offspring who care little about local culture, customs and traditions. Statistics confirm that Han are over-represented in the secondary and tertiary industries as well as in high-status and high-paying occupations. In fact, this is apparent despite the fact that minority nationalities generally have higher educational attainment. Such job distribution also means that Han have particularly strong presence in Xinjiang's cities, thus encouraging Uyghur allegations of internal colonization through encirclement or population swamping.⁴² Even its ancient cities are rapidly acquiring "modern", characteristically Chinese appearance. The



Karakoram Highway near Kokonur Lake (author's personal archive)

world-famous Old Town of Kashgar is being rebuilt according to Beijing's developmental and somewhat "Orientalist", tourist-directed desires, becoming ever-more comparable to Han-dominated Ürümqi. In addition, central authorities are being continuously accused of decimating Xinjiang's fragile environment. Naturally, a nuclear testing site at Lop Nur has become a particularly contentious issue.

Perhaps even more importantly, Uyghur culture suffers from language restrictions at schools, strict media controls, and policies amounting to de facto religious persecution. Indeed, contrary to other provinces with large Muslim minorities, in Xinjiang the number of mosques and religious educational institutions is strictly regulated, worshippers can only use a state-approved version of the Quran, and their religious leaders are heavily connected to the government which continues to maintain strict regulations on the pilgrimage to the Arabian holy city of Mecca hajj.⁴³ Provincial law prohibits children younger than 18 from practicing Islam, that is even entering a mosque, and bans adults from preaching

40 Barbour and Jones, p. 103.

41 Millward, p. 348.

42 Reza Hasmath, "Migration, Labour, and the Rise of Ethno-Religious Consciousness among Uyghurs in Urban Xinjiang." *Journal of Sociology*, 2012, pp. 4-9.

43 Arianna Shorey, "The Hui and the Uyghurs: A Comparison of Relationships with the Chinese State." *PPE Paper Prize*, Paper 3, 2013, pp. 20, 25.



Characteristically Chinese skyline of Ürümqi
(author's personal archive)

to them. Tellingly, youth elsewhere in China (including Tibet) are allowed to worship more freely.⁴⁴ Allegedly, a series of recent outbreaks of anti-government violence in Kashgaria were related to an official ban for men to grow long beards and women to wear headscarves.⁴⁵

As has already been mentioned, Uyghurs essentially lack effective political means to defend their rights within the system, as their “regional autonomy” has in fact enforced heteronomy (rule by others), with Han monopolizing the most powerful local posts and other minorities further diluting the influence of the nominally titular nationality. In other words, Xinjiang’s autonomy has not only been superficial but also discriminatory.⁴⁶ Ironically, the largest *de facto* autonomy in the province has been provided to the XPCC,⁴⁷ arguably the most straightforward and successful instrument in “Han colonization” efforts.

However, Xinjiang’s Han also have a rather impressive list of grievances towards both the Uyghur community and the government. The latter has been primarily accused for its minority preferential policies (*youhui zhengce*) in such areas as one-child policy, university admissions, access to some official positions, criminal justice, poverty alleviation etc.⁴⁸ Indeed, a rather large part of the Han community in Xinjiang openly spoke about perceived discrimination, and disagreed that their standards of living had been rising faster than the Uyghurs.⁴⁹ Many settlers have long become disillusioned with the government which could not deliver on its promises about economic, political and social opportunities in hostile and distant Xinjiang.⁵⁰ They do not trust the official assurances about their safety, and during the worst crises feel obliged to act on their own. Hence, some scholars claim that the “Han problem” is perceived as more central by the authorities than the much-examined “Uyghur problem”. The government is desperate to retain the “partnership of stability” which holds that Han community continues to perform its colonizing role closely following Beijing’s policies, while the latter ensures that economic development benefits them more than the local minorities.⁵¹

The Han feelings of entitlement are further strengthened by their deep-seated ste-

44 Reed and Raschke, p. 23.

45 Damian Grammaticas, “Doubts over China government claims on Xinjiang attack.” BBC, 26 April 2013. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22319579>> [accessed 22 March 2014].

46 Shichor, p. 133.

47 Bovingdon, pp. 60-61, 78-79.

48 Barry Sautman, “Paved with Good Intentions: Proposals to Curb Minority Rights and Their Consequences for China.” *Modern China*, 38 (1), 2012, pp. 10-39, p. 11.

49 Herbert Yee, “Ethnic Relations in Xinjiang: A Survey of Uyghur-Han Relations in Urumqi.” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 36 (12), 2003, pp. 431-452, 434.

50 Côté, p. 1865.

51 Cliff, pp. 82-84.

reotypes towards Xinjiang's largest indigenous ethnic group. To many of them, both inside and outside the province, Uyghurs are simply ungrateful, lazy, violent, knife-wielding, pocket-picking criminals, and certainly potential terrorists.⁵² Some Han private businessmen believe that Uyghurs are less intelligent and less hardworking, thus contributing to their unemployment and socio-economic marginalization.⁵³ The stigmatized Uyghurs naturally respond by disgust, anger, bitterness and strong sense of injustice.⁵⁴ The Internet has led to widely available and unprecedentedly open expressions of discontent from both sides, and was instrumental in the largest recent inter-ethnic clashes. In fact, mutual distrust of official media and lack of reliable information often creates or exacerbates conditions for violent unrest in Xinjiang.⁵⁵

The above-mentioned July 2009 Ürümqi riots clearly displayed all these recent trends. The violence was triggered by the news that at least two Uyghur migrant workers had been killed by the Han as a result of false allegations of the sexual assault of a Han female at a toy factory in Shaoguan, Guangdong province. Tellingly, deadly Uyghur unrest was almost immediately followed by Han counter-riots with animosity against the "terrorists" soon eclipsed by anger at the perceived lenient response of the security forces in general, and Xinjiang's the-then Party boss Wang Lequan in particular.⁵⁶ The last charge



Id Kah in Kashgar is China's largest mosque (author's personal archive)

greatly surprised scholars and observers of the region, who had been considering his unprecedentedly long 15-year period of rule there as characterized by a hard-line approach towards Uyghur autonomy or separatism.⁵⁷ The Han protesters eventually saw their demands satisfied as Beijing removed Wang from its post, thus validating claims about the government's favouritism towards them.⁵⁸

Unfortunately, the "ethnicization" of Xinjiang's discontent⁵⁹ apparent in 2009 unrest has not been stopped, and even spilled over the province's borders. A slow-turning cycle of violence has been visible ever since, characterized by deepening animosity between the Han and Uyghur communities and their somewhat similar distrust of the government. This process involves further "othering" of the opponent, mutual intimidation, indiscriminate attacks and even occasional acts of lynching. While both communities see themselves as second-class people regarding

52 Millward, p. 349.

53 Hao and Liu, p. 217.

54 Smith, p. 156.

55 Millward, p. 355

56 Cliff, p. 80.

57 Millward, p. 354.

58 Côté, pp. 1866-1867.

59 Rian Thum, "Etnicization of Discontent in Xinjiang," *The China Beat*, 2 October 2009. <<http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=905>> [accessed 24 March 2014].

the Han-heartland, a scapegoat for their misfortunes could easily be found either in each other or in the government. The latter thus has a formidable dilemma to deal with where any decision would in fact lead to further instability both inside and out of Xinjiang.

Conclusion

Today Xinjiang's two largest ethnic groups, the Han and Uyghurs, together compose more than 80 or 90 per cent of its total population, depending on the source. The former are China's dominant and privileged majority and the latter its most restless and marginalized minority. Naturally, their mutual relationship has largely determined Xinjiang's recent social, political and even economic milieu. Despite a series of political upheavals and wars for dominance, both communities have mostly peacefully lived side by side for several centuries. However, the 5-year period since 2009 could largely be characterised as a new series of tensions between them. Uyghur identity-formation efforts have a rather impressive history of countering the immigrant Han, who in turn increasingly defined themselves by "othering" the indigenes. Islam has been only one of several identity dimensions in this process, although obviously rising in importance recently.

China-based states have long been trying to subjugate Xinjiang, and communists' supposed success in these efforts has been yet again questioned by Uyghurs. Although harsh atheist and chauvinist repression of the Maoist era gave way to more benevolent, developmental "civilizing" policies,

the main target community appears to become even more restless. Beijing in turn reacted by a rather faulty decision to equate almost any Uyghur protest with extremism and terrorism, especially after the 9/11 attacks. Certainly, the reality is much more complex, and many Uyghurs seem to turn even more desperate, and therefore violent. The most radical of them have increasingly directed their resentment towards the Han neighbours as opposed to more common practice of clashing with representatives of the government, such as police forces.

It would be natural to expect that Xinjiang's constantly increasing Han population should be the government's main ally in its policies towards indigenous communities. After all, these settlers and their descendants share more clear-cut cultural, linguistic and political ties with China-proper. However, the logic and structure of Xinjiang-related violence has shown that this alliance was built on rather shaky foundations. The government is increasingly caught in the middle between comprehensive and even legitimate demands of both groups, and almost any choice it makes would dissatisfy one of them. Yet, this does not mean that the province or the whole country are on the verge of violent inter-ethnic explosion. Despite mutual suspicions, most members of Xinjiang's Han and Uyghur communities can and do indeed cooperate with each other. Beijing's state-building efforts here have time on their side, and future violent outbreaks of inter-ethnic and/or anti-government clashes could be scrapped as unintended, secondary consequences while implementing this supposedly magnificent project.

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