CHAPTER – IV

CHINESE NATIONALISM UNDER THREAT: ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM AND XINJIANG

If Chinese nationalism was challenged by the Tibetan question, it has come under the threat by the Xinjiang issue. At the outset, the notion of the Chinese nation was based on the idea of a unified territory. However, the Chinese state, both imperial and modern has been beset by irredentist challenges to centralized political authority. Therefore, the territorial conception of the Chinese state has been severely tested. A contemporary and long drawn out threat to this concept of the Chinese nation is the Xinjiang unrest. The Chinese state has evolved a variety of strategies to deal with this threat. These strategies also have implications for the development of nation and nationalism in China today.

The history of the Chinese in Central Asia, therefore, is a history of imperialism, of conquest. The Chinese could not here expand, adding contiguous region as they did in their advance toward the Yangtze and beyond, but had to subjugate and dominate from afar. They had, moreover, to compete with the imperialism of the Steppe, which also attempted to assert its control over the oasis world. The record of the Chinese in Central Asia is by no means continuous; in fact, their effective control has been estimated at only about 425 out of about 2000 years, divided into a number of periods, of which the present Chinese rule in the province of Sinkiang is the fifth major period.¹

The above lines from Owen Lattimore’s classic study of the Central Asian region of China provide a perspective on the current Xinjiang problem. Xinjiang today is one of the five minority autonomous regions of China, occupying one-sixth of

¹ Owen Lattimore, Inner Asian Frontiers of China (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940, 1988). The four other periods that Lattimore talks about is first, the Han dynasty (206 BC- AD 220); Second, the Tang dynasty (618- 906 AD); third, the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) and fourth, the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911).
China's landmass, bordering eight countries (Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mongolia, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and the arena for an ethno national conflict of the Uyghurs who constitute 47% of the Xinjiang population. Uyghur nationalism is shaped not only by its own Turkic ethnic identity, but has been reinforced in its contest with the Chinese State. Xinjiang, like Tibet, constitutes an ethnic minority movement striving for identity and self-determination. But, unlike Tibet, Xinjiang presents a more complicated minority problem by virtue of its links with the wider issues of Islamic identity in Central and West Asia. The Islamic factor plus ethnic consciousness have been fused together to produce an ethno-religious conflict in Xinjiang. This problem has been further exacerbated in the post 9/11 phase where the war against international terrorism has influenced the region, and, effectively allowed the Chinese government to blur the distinction between separatism and terrorism. Xinjiang represents a case of the contest between an ethnic minority and the majority Han Chinese nationalism, a contest that is perceived by Beijing as a distinct security threat to the Chinese State.

This chapter first analyzes how the Chinese State perceives the Uyghur movement in the light of its own definitions of nation and nationalism. The chapter then moves on to discuss how the Uyghur identity emerged and became crystallized around the concept of ethnicity. It is argued that Uyghur ethnic identity was defined in its encounters with Chinese Han nationalism. It would be pertinent to mention that the Uyghur movement, like the Tibetan movement did not come into the limelight until it adopted the strategies of violent confrontation that are primarily linked to Islamic militancy. Contrary to the idea of the Uyghur movement as basically fundamentalist, it is argued here that the convergence of
Uyghur aspiration around Islam served as a strategy for the Uyghurs instead of Islam providing the primary religious ideological commitment to their goal of self-determination. The Uyghur problem, therefore, does not represent an essentially Islamic fundamentalist movement. The movement’s focus on human rights violation perpetrated by the Chinese State underscores its democratic liberal values as opposed to those of Islamic fundamentalism. At the same time it is important to note that because the Uyghur movement is inherently weak on account of its fragile identity the incursion of alien influences into the movement has been facilitated complicating and undermining its objective of unity and independence. Finally, due to its fragmented identity the Uyghur movement today faces a severe challenge to its survival in the context of a unitary Han nationalist state ideology where minority identities are hard to sustain and increasingly submerged if not suppressed. At the same time, the persistence of the Uyghur problem in China challenges the notion of Chinese nationalism today and portrays its weakness as an ideology meant to integrate the diverse nationalities into China.

**Conceptualizing the Uyghurs in Chinese Nationalism**

The Chinese State in its drive for national unity and political integration sought to uphold assimilative policies that not only attempted to submerge local identities into Chinese Han identity but also, in the process, threatened the local identities with extinction. This policy of assimilation, the central tenet of Chinese State policy on minorities, reflected the continuation of Chinese imperial policy. Chinese imperial policy was based on its conceptualization of the Chinese State as a civilization and not as a nation. The Chinese civilization developed from the Wei River valley and later expanded to encompass a wide area and, as Tu Wei-ming argues, the idea of a cultural core area thus remained potent and continuous in
The cultural notion of the State determined the imaginary boundary of the Chinese State. Within this cultural boundary resided the Chinese people or Han ren or huaxia. In fact, the word hua or huaxia meant Chinese and the term connoted culture and civilization. These terms were coined in opposition to the term Yi meaning barbarian. This distinction between the Han and non-Han was based on their stage of economic development. The Han represented the agricultural based society leading a sedentary life while the Yi were largely nomadic herders. It was when the non-Han accepted the Chinese notion of development that they came to be incorporated into the Chinese civilization and were regarded as Chinese or Zhongguo ren or huaxia. For a non-Han to become Chinese essentially meant accepting Chinese culture. In effect, all those people who accepted Chinese culture was regarded part of the Chinese civilization and were therefore called Chinese. Therefore, the notion of huaxia or Zhongguo ren was essentially a cultural concept not a racial one. This conceptualization of the state based on cultural identity imparted the notion of civilizational state to China than a concept of political nation state. This notion of civilizational state influenced upon the modern Chinese concept of nationality.

The notion of a civilizational state underscores the notion that all the nationalities can be accommodated without raising the question of self-determination. This explains why the Uyghurs are considered a part of Chinese civilization and are therefore, integral to the Chinese nationhood. At the same time,
it also explains why the term nationality, minority, or ethnicity is denoted by the same word minzu. The use of the same word minzu for nation, nationalities, or minorities implies that culture and history determined Chinese definition of nation.

In China, the word tianxia that is ‘all under heaven’ was used to mean China or the Chinese State. The ruler of this land was called tianzi or ‘son of heaven’. The tianzi thus ruled the land wherever Chinese civilization spread. It was this concept of universal empire, which was challenged, in the nineteenth century. In fact, the idea of modern notion of nation in China emerged with its encounters with the West. Precisely in order to defeat the Manchu and the foreigners threatening China during the unstable period following the ‘Unequal Treaties’, the modern idea of nation, based on well-demarcated territories germinated. In defining the border of the new nation state, the question of who these people were who inhabited in it arose. Therefore, the task of identifying the ‘people’ emerged. Sun Yatsen defined ‘people’ as the ‘five peoples’ of China (wuzu gong he): the Han, Manchu (Man), Mongolian (Meng), Tibetan (Zang) and Hui (all Muslims). The idea behind this was that China needed the support of the entire people to create a National Revolution and overthrow the Qing dynasty and thus create a modern nation. This is reflected in his discussion of nationalism (Minzu Zhuyi) in his Three Principles of the people (Sanmin Zhuyi). Chiang Kai-Shek (Jiang Jieshi) further promoted this assimilation policy in 1939 when he presided over the first National Congress of the Chinese Hui People’s National Salvation Association in Chongqing. Chiang Kai-Shek’s China’s Destiny clearly points out “that there are five peoples designated in China ...is not due to difference in race or blood, but to

---

8 Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, p. 84.
religion and geographic environment. In short the differentiation among China’s five peoples is due to regional and religious factors, and not race or blood”. The Communists too in order to fight imperialistic forces (Japanese) and the domestic forces (Guomindang) followed the same principle of assimilation of all groups under the term Minzu that meant nationality. In fact, only a technical difference was maintained by prefixing ‘small’ to the word nationality to indicate minority population. Han was identified as one of the nationalities along with the other national minorities. But since the Han represented the majority, the will of the Han would automatically dominate the minority will. Dawa Norbu thus noted that the CCP was able to justify the denial of right to self-determination to the national minorities as the will of the majority nationalities’ prevailed and opposed the recognition of such a right.

Thus, the new word minzu (race or people), an import from Japanese emerged. This modern notion of minzu for people was imposed upon the traditional Chinese word Huaxia or Han ren meaning person in the nineteenth century. China equated nationality with an ethnic group that historically is a part of the Chinese State. Thus, while in Europe the term nationality was equated with citizenship, in China it implied a historical-ethnical concept. Therefore, the term minority in Chinese does not imply a separate political identity but cultural identity.

While at the rhetorical level Confucian Culturalism informed the Chinese notion of nation and nationalism, at the practical level the Chinese State adopted

---

12 See, Ibid., p. 22.
both diplomatic and military means in its nation building process. The Chinese State developed from the Wei River valley in the east and gradually moved westward. This westward movement was prompted by the threat posed by the nomadic incursions in China’s West. In order to protect the Chinese core civilization against the nomads, the Chinese built the Great Wall. It was during the Han crusade against the Xiongnu that the Chinese Imperial State discovered the profitable trade route through Central Asia. In particular, the Chinese learnt about the “heavenly horses” that could be bought to improve the Chinese cavalry. The interest in horses induced the Chinese to latch on to the Silk Route trade and therefore, the West region of China turned vitally important both strategically and economically. But the Chinese Imperial State did not bring the Xinjiang region under direct political administration. Rather it came under the Chinese Tribute System. In fact, when the Chinese power became too weak to cope with the Xiongnu the diplomacy of the Tribute System was adopted. It was successful in bringing extended peace to the Chinese West. At other times when the nomads were divided, the Chinese power prevailed upon them, though did not bring them under direct administration. In the long term, however, the Central Asian region dotted with oasis-based settlements prevented the nomads from presenting a united resistance against the Chinese State.

In the age of modern imperialism, when the Central Asian region fell to advancing Russian and the British armies and as the Great Game began to be played out, a weak Manchu power realized the necessity of controlling the

---

Xinjiang region. Already reeling under the Western onslaughts in the East the Manchus found that the peripheral area that had been created throughout history in Xinjiang in the Northwest to protect the core civilization was fast eroding. At this juncture China's definition of State based on Confucian Culturalism proved futile in the face of Western nation state ideology based on power and delineation of territories. The need to delineate boundaries of China thus emerged. Thus, in 1882 the Western region was brought under the Qing control and assigned the new name, Xinjiang, or the new frontier. This coincided with the emergence of a new discourse on nation and nationalism and Sun Yatsen came to the forefront with notion of a China comprised of five peoples. The objective for Sun Yatsen was to enlist the support of the minorities in China's revolution as he wrote in the 1924 Manifesto of the First national Congress of the Kuomintang:

The Kuomintang's Principle of Nationalism has a twofold meaning, first, the liberation of the Chinese nation, and second, the equality of all the nationalities in China" ... "the Kuomintang solemnly declares that it recognizes the right to self-determination of all the nationalities in China and that a free and united republic of China (a free union of all the nationalities) will be established when the anti-imperialist and anti-warlord revolution is victorious. 16

Communist China appropriated this notion of nationalism based on five nationalities but in their count the numbers of nationalities were increased to fifty-six. At the theoretical level, thus, Chinese nationalism was based on the unity and equality of all nationalities as evidenced in the Chinese Government's White Paper on Minorities. But, at the practical level, the right to equality was a sham since Han chauvinism prevailed, as exemplified in the Chinese policies in Xinjiang in the post 1949 period. In fact, it was the Chinese policy towards the Uyghurs that led

them to crystallize their movement against the state around the concept of Uyghur identity and ethnicity.

Shaping of the Uyghur Identity

Political identity:

The Uyghur region lacked a continuous existence as a separate independent region in history. Though the ethnic designation "Uyghur" for this group came into modern usage in the early 20th century, their beginnings reach back to the founding of a Uyghur Empire on the Mongolian Steppe in 744 AD. When the Kirghiz conquered the Uyghur Kingdom in 840 A.D., the majority Uyghurs migrated in two major branches. One moved to the east and founded the kingdom of Kanchow in the present day Gansu region. The other moved to the west and founded the kingdom of Karakhoja in the present day Turpan in Xinjiang. It is the latter branch that established the Karakhoja or Qocho that lasted for four centuries (850-1250). It was Qocho that became an amalgam of an indigenous people and civilization. Later these people came under the influence of the Mongols who swept Central Asia in 1220 A.D. and many of the Uyghurs were incorporated into the Mongol administration. Under the Mongol Chagatai rulers the Central Asian region was divided into two khanates: Transoxiana or Western Turkestan in the West (the present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) and Eastern Turkestan in the East (the present day Xinjiang). After the waning of the Mongol influence the Uyghurs existed as several small principalities.

17 For a detailed account of the early Uyghur history see, Svat Soucek, A History of Inner Asia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Chapter 4 of the book describes in detail the Uyghur civilization and cultural achievements under the Qocho.
18 Ibid., p.81.
Historically, despite the Chinese invasion, East Turkestan had never been an integral part of China. Due to its peculiar geopolitical location, it came under the influence of several powers from time to time—Greeks, Bactrian, Hun, Kushan, Mongols, Chinese and Russian.\textsuperscript{19} If in the medieval period East Turkestan was the battleground between Mongols and Chinese, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century it turned into a bone of contention among the British, the Russian and the Chinese. Further, the East Turkestan area with its peculiar oasis and mountainous topography prevented the growth of united resistance among the Turkic groups—Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Tatar and Uyghur. This explains why the region fell prey to different powers and acquired a rather turbulent history. Nevertheless, the Uyghurs had their own kingdoms in history and, therefore, their past political identity inspired them to aspire for independent political control throughout and instigated them to rebel against the Chinese state.

According to contemporary Uyghur intellectuals, the idea of Uyghur nationalism or Turk nationalism was born soon after the Manchu conquest of East Turkestan in 1759. The Uyghur ideology of ending Chinese colonial rule and establishing an independent country of East Turkestan defined the concept of Uyghur nationalism. From the reign of the Manchu’s onwards when Xinjiang came under direct administration, there had been frequent rebellions of the Uyghurs and other ethnic groups in Xinjiang. From 1759 until 1862, the Uyghurs staged as many as 40 major revolts against the Manchu.\textsuperscript{20} However, the region’s first demand for independence can be traced to an uprising by a local chieftain named


Yakub Beg in 1865. Though he was finally defeated in 1877, the 12 years of his reign set the precedent for Xinjiang’s independent movement based on appeals to religion and ethnicity.\(^{21}\) Also, the Turkic groups of Xinjiang twice achieved brief statehood, from 1931 to 1934 with the establishment of “Turkish-Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan” and another from 1944 to 1949 with the creation of the “East Turkestan Republic” (ETR). The leadership of ETR was mostly dominated by the Uyghurs. However, most of the Uyghurs leaders were killed in a mysterious air crash on their way to Beijing in 1949.\(^{22}\)

This brief experience of statehood rekindled the notion of independence from time to time and rendered the Uyghur movement as a primarily national separatist movement centered around ethnic identity. Expressions of nationalism and national identity can be found in the literature and writings of nationalists and native intellectuals of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, attesting to the existence of Uyghur nationalism. Most writings were strongly attached with the terms “Turkistan” (Sharqiv Turkistan or Eastern Turkistan), Turkistanli (Turkistani) or simply “Turk”.\(^{23}\) Some contemporary Uyghur diasporic intellectuals note that though the terms “Uzbek” or “Uyghur” were not used in the sense of ethnic identity or national consciousness during this period, the writers did employ the terms “Turk” or “Turkistani” to indicate historical group awareness and the term “Turki” for their native language.

---


\(^{23}\) Abdurakhim Albayev, “Uyghur Nationalism”, http://www.mail.com/uighur-l@taklamakan.org
Regional Identity:

Xinjiang’s topography is a mix of mountains, basins, deserts, oases, and rivers. The region’s oasis-based topography allowed only settlements around the scattered oases that produced a pocket-like identity and therefore the Uyghurs were identified by the names of the oasis where they settled. Thus the Kashgarlik were from Kashgar, Khotanlik from Khotan, Turfanlik from Turfan.24 Interestingly, however, before the 15th century the people in the Tarim basin area, who were essentially Buddhist, were referred to as Uyghurs. After this region came under Islam, the term Uyghur was dropped and instead local names came into vogue to describe these oases dwelling people. Therefore, the “Uyghur” label ceased to be used as an ethnic label for the Uyghurs for almost 500 years. It was only in 1931, the ethnonym Uyghur was revived by Chinese government officials under the influence of Soviet advisors. This ethnonym was revived when ethnic violence erupted in Xinjiang as a result of government disaffection. To diffuse the rebellion Chinese government officials and their Soviet advisors applied the ethnic classification system used in Soviet Central Asia. However, the Chinese did not take from the Soviet’s the policy of creating a federal union of states/provinces based on ethnic classification. The political implications of this would have been to encourage the creation of a political identity for the ethnic minorities which could result in irredentist activity/separatist movements given the initial weakness of the Chinese state. The Chinese fears were borne out in the experience of the Soviet breakup after 1990. Thus, the classification allowed the Uyghurs to rediscover

themselves as an ethnic group.\textsuperscript{25} It is around the revival of the term "Uyghur" that the modern notion of Uyghur identity has been cemented.

\textit{Religious identity:}

While ethnicity in itself was important, the most important marker of the Uyghur was their Islamic tradition. According to historical records, it took nearly 500 years for most of the Uyghurs to become Muslims. Islamic faith spread in 950 A.D. to Kashgar, while it reached Turpan only in 1450 A.D. Where Joseph Fletcher views the coming of Islamic influence to China from the outside in several "tides", Dru C. Gladney prefers to call the various Islamic influences "modes" instead of "tides" because each new tide did not replace the earlier Islamic movement but the different "modes" contested each other and coexisted in an uneasy relationship with each other. Further, Islamic currents were redefined in its contact with Chinese culture.

Dru Gladney identifies four modes of Islamic movement in China.\textsuperscript{26} First, the \textit{Gedimu}, or traditional Chinese Islam, that came to China along with the Arabs, Persians, Central Asians and Mongolian merchants in the 7th century. This group followed the Sunni tradition of Hanafi Islam. Second, the mode of the Sufi missionaries who came in the 17th century and represented a reformist movement based on a mystical interpretation. They established local and national networks known as the \textit{Menhuan}. Of the four \textit{Menhuan} (Qadiri, Khufiyya, Jahriyya and Kubrawiyya) Khufiyya and Jahriyya were important. These \textit{Menhuan} arose from the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order that came from the Central Asian region west of the

\textsuperscript{25} Justin Ben Adams, "China", in David Westerlund and Ingvar Svanberg, (eds.), \textit{Islam Outside the Arab World} (Surry: Curzon Press, 1999), p192.

Pamir and spread to Southern Xinjiang. This Sufi order played a significant role in later 18th and 19th century politics in Xinjiang and their committed social reform through political action brought them into conflict with Manchu-ruled China. While the Khufiyya promoted personal internal reform over political change, the Jahriyya sect propagated rebellion against the Chinese state. Thus, it was the Jahriyya rebellion against the Qing led to the Yakub Beg rebellion 1864-77 which expelled the Chinese government from Xinjiang. The third mode was characterized by the scriptural concerns and modern reforms represented by the Yihewani sect that grew at the end of the Qing dynasty as a result of the increased contact of the Chinese Muslims with the Middle East. The Yihewani sect was concerned with modern reforms in China and this emphasis on national concern earned them the Chinese government’s support. This Yihewani sect heavily dominated the Chinese Islamic Association that was established in 1955. Fourth, the mode represented by the Salafiyya sect in Northwest China which grew out of the Yihewani sect and came to prominence in the 1980s reform era. This Islamic current, unlike the Yihewani, stressed a non-politicized fundamentalist return to the Wahabi ideals. This represents, according to Gladney, the more recent Islamic movement that is fundamentalist in nature for it calls Muslims back to the basic Quranic ideals, but it is as yet apolitical in its stance vis-à-vis the state.


28 Ben Adams, p.199.

These four modes of Islamic movement in China established a strong sense of Islamic identity among the Xinjiang Muslims. In fact, Islam provided a unifying consciousness and Xinjiang Muslims identified themselves as belonging to the *Umma* (World community of Islam) through regular prayers, reading the Quran, observing religious holidays, adopting Islamic food habits and Islamic symbols. Islam linked the specific identity of Xinjiang Muslims to the wider Muslim community and at the same time functioned as an "ethnic marker" by drawing the boundaries of the community in opposition to other religious communities. In his case study on Hui Muslims in China, Dru Gladney argues that the ethnic identity of Muslims is inseparably identified with an Islamic tradition and so it is "more than an ethnic identity; it is ethno-religious." Therefore, religion is not only a system of faith for the 7.2 million Uyghur Muslims but also the vehicle for preserving their historical traditions and culture.

The Uyghurs, thus, possess a distinctive language, religion, culture and history and display all the characteristics that signify a nation although contemporary Uyghur identity is submerged in the Chinese state's drive for assimilation and its integrative nationalist policy. Assimilation policy has, however, instigated the Uyghurs to rebel against the Chinese state validating Gladney's view that the modern resurgence of Uyghur identity is very much the result of Uyghur interaction with the Chinese state. Thus, ethnicity cannot be reduced to the purely primordial but involves a dialectic interaction of the two main aspects of ethnicity: culturally defined notions of descent and socio-political

---

circumstance.\textsuperscript{32} In this context, the role of the Chinese state is significant. The Chinese state in its drive for national unity and political integration has sought to uphold assimilative policies that not only moved to submerge local identities into Chinese identity but also in the process threatened local identities with extinction. It is in this context that the contemporary role of the Chinese State should be explored as Uyghur nationalism is on the upsurge and terrorism has posed a primary threat to the existence of the nation state.

\textbf{Uyghurs in the Mao era}

Even after the communist takeover Xinjiang remained for sometime under the influence of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{33} In Xinjiang the Soviets had a satellite army and joint Russian- Chinese state enterprises. Also there were three large Soviet Consulates in Kuldja, Urumqi and Kashgar. It was only after the death of Stalin in 1953 that the Chinese state renegotiated its special relationship with Soviet Russia and by 1955 Xinjiang was proclaimed an autonomous region of China.\textsuperscript{34} To prevent Soviet influence and to consolidate the CPC’s control over Xinjiang, a Bingtuan or a military-agricultural colony was established in Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{35} This organization consisted of demobilized members of the communist First Field Army, the entire KMT garrison (now known as 22\textsuperscript{nd} Army Corps) and the former ETR army (now designated the 5\textsuperscript{th} Army Corps)\textsuperscript{36} and was predominantly Han in organization. Its overt purpose was to carry out land reclamation but in reality was


\textsuperscript{33} S.C.M. Paine, \textit{Imperial Rivals: China, Russia and their Disputed Frontier} (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
to guard against Russians as well as to maintain vigilance over the minority groups. The Bingtuan, thus, turned out to be a hated institution among the minorities. Uyghur discontent however, also grew with the Han policy of segregation pursued in Xinjiang.\(^{37}\) The Han policy of segregation was evident in the building of new cities where the Han enjoyed separate restaurants, movie theatres and market places. Urumqi, the capital, turned out to be a Han city with 80% of its population Han as against 20% minorities. The idea behind this segregation was actually to minimize friction between Han and the minorities but this aggravated ethnic tension in that the Uyghur and other minorities perceived this step as discriminatory.

Ethnic tension in Xinjiang was further exacerbated in the late 1950s when the anti-rightist campaign was launched in 1957. Minority elite leaders were accused of “local nationalism” and were replaced by Han cadres. The campaign ended in 1959 but it distanced the minorities from the central government and Han people.\(^{38}\) A bigger crisis occurred in 1958 when the Great Leap Forward (GLF) was launched. The experiment had disastrous results with starvation and famine in the countryside. This fuelled ethnic hostility and there were riots in Ining/ Kuldja. Besides the economic crisis, minority culture too came under attack. Traditional dresses used by the minorities were criticized for being too elaborate and using too much cloth, and minority festivals were regarded as a wastage of precious time.\(^{39}\) As a result of these harassments, some 70,000 people mostly Uyghurs and Kazakhs fled to Soviet Kazakhstan in 1962. Worse condition followed with the launching of

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p.252.
\(^{39}\) Ibid.
the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (GPCR) in 1966. Under the GPCR the masses were instructed to rebel against capitalist roaders and root out “feudal reactionary cultural remnants” and return to the path of orthodoxy. 40 For the minorities this meant the imposition of a radical assimilationist policy. The policy that affected the minority most was the policy to “destroy the four olds” (old ideas, cultures, customs and habits).41 Religious freedom was, thus, trampled upon with the closure and destruction of mosques, the humiliation of Muslim religious leaders, the destruction of works of art, and banning of the Arabic script. In the midst of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, yet another attempt was made to establish an East Turkestan Republic.42 According to one Uyghur diasporic source the East Turkestan People’s Party was secretly established in February 1963 and in the midst of the Cultural Revolution it soon developed into a bigger network with three district organizations known as the “Youth Organization”, the “Tengritakh Revengers” and the “Tengritakh Ular”. 43 By 1969 there emerged 78 counter-revolutionary grassroots organization. The aim of these organizations was to establish an independent East Turkestan Republic through armed struggle. An Uyghur diasporic source also mentions that ETR’s aim was to seize power through the Soviet Union’s assistance. However, the CPC quickly crushed the counter-revolutionary uprising. This source also indicates that the ETR claimed that “Xinjiang had been an independent country since the beginning of the time, it has fallen to a Chinese colony only in recent times.” Therefore, it is evident that ethnic unrest continued even under Communist rule along the same ethnic lines. Second,

40 Giri Deshingkar, p.299.
42 Ibid., p.254.
43 The Translated Document, accessed from http://www.taklamakan.org/uighur_1/archive/2_4_1. html on 12-01-03
the Soviets continued to aid the ethnic disturbances in Xinjiang mainly with supplies of arms. Third, the policies of the GLF and the GCPR heightened the minorities’ sense of awareness of being different from the Han.\textsuperscript{44} The policy of the repression of the minorities’ language, culture, customs imparted a sense of “stubborn separatism” among the minorities.\textsuperscript{45}

**Uyghurs in the Deng era**

Under Deng a decisive change took place with the jettisoning of the class struggle. Deng called for economics instead of politics in command. The CPC declared that the nationality problems could be solved not through class struggle but only by removing backwardness and encouraging economic development.\textsuperscript{46} Under the impact of the reform and opening up religious freedom was also granted. Monasteries and mosques were repaired and built. Institutes for the study of nationalities were reopened. The learning of minority languages was encouraged in schools. Minority leaders were restored to their previous political positions. Above all, Muslims were encouraged to make the hajj to Mecca. This brought the Chinese Muslims in contact with the world Muslim community and made them aware of their ethno-religious roots. The minorities were also exempted from the family planning programme. Muslims living in the cities were allowed to have two children while in the rural areas more than two were allowed.\textsuperscript{47}

Politically, the National People’s Congress passed the Electoral law in 1982 that stipulated that minority delegates should account for around 12\% of the total delegates to the NPC. Also, at least one deputy should be elected to the NPC from


\textsuperscript{45} The term is borrowed from Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontier of China*.

\textsuperscript{46} June T. Dreyer, p.378.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p.380.
a nationality. The Party, thus, made greater efforts to recruit minority members and give them positions of greater visibility, if not always greater responsibility.\textsuperscript{48} Further, the 1984 Law on Regional Autonomy gave Autonomous areas the right to draw up legislation appropriate to the culture and traditions of the nationality.\textsuperscript{49} Also autonomous areas gained greater control over allocation of funds in the territory under their jurisdiction.

In 1986 the Karakoram Highway to Pakistan was completed and opened and in 1988 Xinjiang got a direct air link between Istanbul and Urumqi. In 1990 the railway between Urumqi and Alma-Ata was completed. This transformed Xinjiang from the “backdoor of the Far East to the front door to the West”\textsuperscript{50} Also dozens of border crossings were opened up for trade. In 1996 Xinjiang was linked to the outside world by 26 bus lines and 41 international and domestic air routes. The opening of the border trade not only opened up new investment opportunities for the Uyghurs but also created the free flow of ideas and goods between the Uyghurs of Xinjiang and the neighbouring Turkic people of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. Further, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the creation of the Central Asian States created tremendous impact on the Uyghurs and rekindled their aspirations for independence like that of their brethren in the newly gained independent states. Thus, Deng Xiaoping’s open door policy and religious freedom coupled with developments on Xinjiang’s Western border propelled the fresh assertions of independence among the Uyghurs.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
As a result in December 1985 four hundred students from Xinjiang staged a protest and petitioned the Chinese officials to end nuclear tests in the region. They presented seven other demands which included:

- The democratic election of minority people to replace Han officials assigned by Beijing;
- An end to coercive family planning among minority people in the region;
- Increased support for ethnic education in the region and more opportunities to study abroad;
- Economic self-determination;
- Political self-rule (short of independence);
- A proclamation of support for the student's movement in Xinjiang itself;
- An end to the practice of sending convicted Chinese criminals to Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{51}

The list of students' demands indicates that the liberal policies of the Deng era had not mitigated the grievances of the Xinjiang minorities. During the student movement in Tiananmen in 1989 a movement took place in Xinjiang to protest the publication of a book in Chinese entitled \textit{Sexual Customs} that denigrated Islam. This was spearheaded by the Huis and later joined by nine other Muslim minorities. This movement spread to various other areas including Shanghai, Gansu, Yunnan, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang.

Further, a more violent movement started in Xinjiang in April 1990 leading to the Baren uprising. It was a significant turning point in Uyghur discontent for it indicated the underlying violence in the unrest. The movement was led by Zeydin

Yusuf and called for Jihad to wipe out Chinese rule in Xinjiang and establish East Turkestan. According to Xinjiang television some unknown political groups claimed that the Islamic Party of East Turkestan organized the movement and that it was by far the “most well-planned, well-organized, anti-party and anti-socialist movement”.\(^{52}\)

From 1990s onwards Xinjiang history is dotted with several incidents of unrest. Chronologically,

- There was a major uprising in Baren near Kashgar in April 1990
- 2 bombs on buses in Urumqi killed 6 people in February 1992
- 5 Muslim separatists were executed in June 1995
- Chinese police reportedly found a large cache of weapon in 1995
- The Yining uprising in 2-8th February 1996
- 3 explosions on 3 buses took place in Urumqi in 25\(^{th}\) February 1996
- Bomb explosions on 2 buses in Beijing in 7-8\(^{th}\) March 1996
- Pro-Beijing cleric assassinated in March 1996
- Xinjiang People’s Political Consultative Conference official assassinated and 9 Uyghurs killed in gun battle with police in May 1996
- Chinese arrests 2,773 terrorists and criminals in June 1996
- 3 bombs in Xinjiang capital killed 9 in February 1997
- 8 Uyghurs executed in June 1997

One of the most important events in this decade was that of the Yining uprising of February 1997. The uprising took place when Uyghur residents of Yining carried out a peaceful demonstration against the arrest of 30 prestigious

religious leaders. Given the frequency and intensity of the Uyghur protest, the Chinese government believed that separatist forces from outside primarily backed the unrest. The Regional People’s Political Consultative Conference of Xinjiang, Ismail Yashenof, named seven separatist movements located outside China, which have been trying to stir up tension between the Han Chinese and minorities.53

The Reassertion of Uyghur Identity and the Role of the Chinese State

China’s present policy toward the minority groups is rooted in the Chinese notions of nation and nationality. The PRC’s official policy with regard to nationalities has four aspects: the ethnic classification project, limited autonomy, Hanization of Xinjiang and repressive state policies. These four aspects have influenced the Uyghurs and have reinforced their ethnic identity in the post 1949 era. At the same time, these policies indicate that behind the rhetoric of development and equality, Han chauvinism remains a consistent feature of Han-Uyghur interaction.

Ethnic Classification Project:

The first step toward the Chinese policy of assimilation was the seemingly paradoxical policy of the identification and recognition of minority nationalities in China. Fei Xiaotong, who studied the process of ethnic identification and enumeration, noted that some 400 minority-groups had applied for recognition by 1955.54 The government carried out detailed studies and field research in 1953 to ascertain these groups. Thus Han minzu (nationality) was recognized as the

54 Fei Xiaotong’s writing on “Plurality and Unity in the Configuration of the Chinese People” is available on the web site, http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/xiaotong90.pdf Also See Dru Gladney, “Essentializing the Han” where he regards that Fei Xiaotong’s understanding of national identity and social development is based on a strong commitment to Stalinist-Leninist nationalist policy. http://cio.ceu.hu/courses/CIO/modules/Module07Gladney/Gladney_03.html
majority nationality (92% at present) and the rest 55 minority people were called minority nationality (shaoshu minzu, 8% at present). In identifying a nationality in China, the PRC government adopted Stalin’s four-fold definition of a ‘nation’. According to Stalin a nation must have four essential elements: a common language, a common geographic living area, a common economic life, and a common psyche based on a common culture. However, these criteria could not be totally applied in classifying a nationality because of diverse identities in China. In fact, the Chinese leadership deviated from the Stalinist model by emphasizing the self-consciousness of the group. So people’s statements about their identities, their desired identifications and their actual ones were taken into account and considered together with other factors such as economic development, language and religious affiliation.

The Communist’s after 1949, thus, expanded the enumeration of nationalities from 5 to 56. The pre-1949 idea that all nationalities in China were equal and were essentially defined by their residence in China was kept intact. However, the Chinese state’s project of classifying different ethnic groups into nationalities instead of blurring identities reinforced their distinctiveness. By defining and representing the “minority” as exotic, colourful, and primitive, the State policy also homogenized the majority as united, mono-ethnic and modern and contributed to a growing awareness of nationalism. As Gladney notes what


56 Nicholas Tapp, p. 67.

actually took place was the construction of the majority at the expense of the exoticization of the minority.  

**Limited Autonomy:**

The second aspect of Chinese policy was to grant limited autonomy to areas dominated by minority peoples. Five such areas came under autonomous rule at the provincial level: Xinjiang, Xizang, Ningxia, Guangxi and Inner Mongolia. Besides these, there are 31 autonomous prefectures, 105 autonomous counties and about 3000 nationality townships at the lower level. The 1954 Constitution clearly made attempts to implement the right to secession illegal and established a mere formal equality of the nationalities and introduced ‘regional autonomy’. An analysis of the 1954, 1975, 1978 and 1982 Constitutions of the PRC show how the principle of regional autonomy was consolidated. While the 1975 Constitution devoted only one Article (Art.24) discussing “Organs of Self-government of National Autonomous Areas” the 1982 Constitution devoted 11 Articles to the regional autonomy areas. The Preamble to the 1982 Constitution stipulated that:

Regional autonomy is practiced in areas where people of minority nationalities live in compact communities; in these areas organs of self-government are established for the exercise of the right of autonomy. All the national autonomous areas are inalienable parts of the People's Republic of China.

Subsequently the 1984 Law on Regional National Autonomy was passed which, though overtly intended to redistribute some powers of autonomy to the National Autonomous Areas, was actually meant to curb any potential excesses in  

---

58 Dru C. Gladney, "Representation and national identification". http://cio.ceu.hu/courses/cio/modules/Module07Gladney/Gladney_01.html


61 *1982 Constitution*. (Emphasis added)
the exercise of autonomy. Thus all illusions of separatism were quashed under the rubric of ‘national unity’ and the insistence that the autonomous regions are essentially an integral part of China. It had a superficial emphasis on language and folklore rather than on the “deeper springs of ethnic identity like religions and historical traditions.” Thus, China has only adopted a limited autonomy principle and maintains strong control over the region with enormous PLA forces and military bases located there.

Further, the PRC has adopted the Qing policy of encouraging Han migration to Xinjiang and, in effect, turning the majority Uyghur population into a minority group in Xinjiang itself. This has eroded the very basis of the policy of extending autonomy to a minority province. In Xinjiang the Chinese continue to exhibit all real political power in the region. Thus, there is no meaningful autonomy in China but only what Binh G. Phan calls “paper autonomy”. The Uyghur discontent is, therefore, rooted in the Chinese principle of autonomy. Though there exists a great deal of controversy among scholars regarding whether autonomy promotes secession or prevents it, Yash Ghai in his study on autonomy argues that “true autonomy prevents secession”. But the Chinese State practised limited autonomy because for the Chinese State real autonomy presents a dilemma. If the Uyghurs are given cultural and religious freedom they are inclined to separatism, while if their cultural and religious rights are strictly controlled and suppressed they are still prone to separatist tendencies.

63 Ibid.
64 Binh G. Phan, p. 84.
65 Yash Ghai, p. 23.
Further, in order to keep Xinjiang divided along ethnic lines and prevent the minorities ganging up against the Han, the Chinese State, established ethnic prefectures and autonomous counties within XUAR itself comprising different ethnic groups such as Ili Kazakh Prefecture, Kizilsu Kirgiz Prefecture, Bayingholin Mongol Prefecture and Xihanzi Hui Prefecture. Thus the ten minority groups in Xinjiang rather than presenting a united resistance against the Han are divided among themselves.

*Hanization of Xinjiang:*

The Hanization of Xinjiang took place in basically two ways: the establishment of Bingtuan and the transfer of the Han population into Xinjiang.

*Establishment of Bingtuan* - Bingtuan or Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, an institution meant for control of the ethnic minority in Xinjiang, became operative from the early 1950s onwards. It is basically a quasi-military organization that maintained constant vigil on the minority population. Abolished after the Cultural Revolution it was revived again in the 1990s with the perceived need to project China’s influence into the area and to protect against ethnic unrest. During the 1990s, the Bingtuan has been placed directly under the authority of the central government in Beijing and has been granted privileges.

---


giving it the same status as the XUAR regional government. This further compromised the notion of autonomy in Xinjiang. The Bingtuan was also largely responsible for transporting the Han population into Xinjiang. In ordinary circumstances the Bingtuan served to control the economy, but in times of unrest it serves as an effective arm of the PLA in suppressing unrest in Xinjiang and played a key role in ending the 1990 Baren uprising. Thus, this organization created much animosity among the minorities.

Transfer of Han population- The Chinese policy of transferring massive number of the Han population to the region was seen as a great assault on the Uyghur community. Like the Manchus, the Chinese Communists also consistently advocated the policy of mass Han Chinese migration in Xinjiang in order to stabilize the border region. The mass transportation of Han Chinese was facilitated with the development of roads linking Lanzhou to Urumqi and then from Urumqi to Qorla and on to Kashgar.69 The Han migration has, however, drastically altered the region's demographic picture. The following table indicates the changing demographic situation in Xinjiang and the rising Han migration in the region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic groups</th>
<th>1949</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Han</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>40.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uyghurs</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazak</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyz</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hui</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolian</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Han who constituted only 7% in 1949 now comprise 40.61% in Xinjiang. This threatens the Uyghur group identity. The influx of Han population, according to David Wang, has created a dual structure of ethnic composition.\textsuperscript{70} The majority of the Han people concentrated in the North around Urumqi are much better off economically, while most of the minority nationalists in the South of Xinjiang around Kashgar are living in comparatively backward conditions. This disparity between north and south has created enormous discontent among the Uyghurs. The table below indicates that Kashgar or Kashi, an Uyghur dominated city, has triple the population than Urumqi, a Han dominated city but has a considerably low GDP rate and little industrial development.

\textsuperscript{70} David Wang, “Han Migration and Social Changes in Xinjiang”, Issues and Studies, Vol. 34, No. 7 (July 1998), p.34.
### Economic Indicators of major Cities of Xinjiang (1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cities</th>
<th>Population (Million)</th>
<th>GDP (RMB bln)</th>
<th>Industrial Output (RMB bln)</th>
<th>Retail Sales (RMB bln)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urumqi</td>
<td>1.589</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kashgar</td>
<td>3.342</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook

### Comparison of Economic Indicators

![Comparison of Economic Indicators](image_url)

**Repressive State Policies:** The Chinese State systematically followed repressive policies to not only maintain effective control in Xinjiang but to assimilate the minorities into the Han culture. But political, economic, religious, cultural repression has fused to create a rather explosive situation in Xinjiang. In March 1996, the Standing Committee of the CCP Politburo convened a special session to discuss the "Xinjiang question." The official record of that meeting, called Document No. 7, is a clear indication that Beijing had reasserted central leadership control over the region. Document No. 7 covered ten major issues ranging from intensified controls over religious activity to the need for wholesale reinforcement.

---

of military and security preparedness to collaboration with China's neighbors to counter destabilizing forces in Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{72}

\textit{Political Persecution:}

The Chinese government has repressed all kinds of political dissent such as criticism of the government's abuse of religious and cultural freedoms. In the course of the crackdown the government has systematically perpetrated gross human rights violation against the Uyghurs including arbitrary and summary executions, arbitrary arrests and prolonged detentions without charge or trial, denial of access to lawyers and particularly cruel methods to torture to extract confessions and incriminating information.\textsuperscript{73} These issues of gross human rights violation is evident in the students' list of demands in 1985 and also continues today in the grievance list emanating from the diasporic websites.\textsuperscript{74} Since the September 11 attack on the US, the Chinese government has used the global war on terrorism as a justification for intensifying its crackdown on the Uyghur people, and has effectively portrayed the Uyghur struggle for basic human rights and self-determination as terrorism. Thus, the Chinese government has managed to place the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) on the terrorist list of the US. With the inclusion of ETIM on the terrorist list the Chinese State seeks to portray the whole Uyghur protest as terrorist. The US view this as further political persecution and essentially a human rights violation of the Uyghur people.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{73} Uyghurs Human Rights Coalition, \url{http://www.uyghurs.org/human_rights.htm}

\textsuperscript{74} The students' list of demands is discussed later. There are several Uyghur Diaspora websites belonging to the Uyghur diasporic organizations. Such as Uyghur American Association, Uyghur Human Rights Coalition, Free Eastern Turkestan, Eastern Turkestan Information Center and Citizens Against Chinese Communist propaganda.
Religious Persecution:

The Amnesty International report of 2002 mentions that in Xinjiang religious practice has been restricted since the 1950s. The crackdown on religious activity was severely intensified from October 2001. The Amnesty Report suggests that dozens of Muslim Chinese were detained or arrested for illegal religious activities in various places including Khotan, Kashgar and other prefectures. Other measures include closure of mosques, banning religious practices such as fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, seeking the permission of the Chinese government to attend festivals and ceremonies of the Muslims. Apart from these restrictions, since October 2001 the program of compulsory “political education” classes for Imams has been started and some 8000 Imams are reported trained in this “political education”.75

Cultural persecution:

The Chinese government has systematically repressed all truth about Uyghur history for fear of the development of nationalist sentiments. One of the Uyghur diaspora websites mentions that the Chinese government in May 1991 launched an attack on three books published in Xinjiang entitled- *The Uyghur People, A Brief history of the Huns* and *Ancient Uyghur Literature*.76 The writer of *The Uyghur People*, Turgun Almas, was put under house arrest and his book was banned. Most works on Uyghurs are written by the Chinese who effectively manipulate Xinjiang’s history to prove the Chinese control over the region from

---


times immemorial. At the same time the Chinese government has made every effort to institutionalize Chinese language in the spheres of education work and regional administration. Han dominated work units and companies prefer to hire employees fluent in the Chinese language. This policy has not only led to higher unemployment among the Uyghurs but also led to the obliteration of Uyghur language and culture.

Economic Repression:

Xinjiang is known for its rich mineral resources. About $\frac{2}{5}$ of China’s oil, gold, copper and wool are produced here. Xinhua news reports that 40 oil and gas fields have been discovered in the region with proven reserves of 2 billion tons of oil and 160 billion cubic meters of natural gas. But the Uyghurs do not have a share in the region’s economy. Han Chinese, by virtue of their language and training, control the major industries in Xinjiang and its economic production is mainly geared to the requirements of the center. For instance, the oil industry is almost completely run by Han Chinese. The China National Petroleum Co. brought most of its workers into Xinjiang from other parts of China, bypassing the Xinjiang petroleum Bureau in carrying out exploration. Thus, economically Xinjiang faced a dual assault; while the Han population marginalized the local Uyghur population and prevented it from participating in the region’s economy, the government siphoned off the regions rich resources to develop China’s East. The Chinese government’s “Western Big Development Project” (Xibu Da Kaifa) in Xinjiang seems to be concentrated only in developing the regions infrastructure. The project

77 Ibid.
includes construction of roads, airports, railroads and a $14 billion pipeline linking Xinjiang’s natural gas fields to Shanghai, 2,500 miles to the Southeast. However, mere infrastructure development will not address the more persistent ethnic problem of the Uyghur. The socio-economic development of the region is quite low compared to the national standard. The table below, which shows the educational level of Xinjiang’s residents indicates the low level of development compared to other regions. Statistics from provinces in each of the five regions indicate Xinjiang’s comparative position in education.

**Comparison of Xinjiang’s Education level with other provinces**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regions</th>
<th>Provinces</th>
<th>No. of Universities /colleges</th>
<th>No. of Middle Schools</th>
<th>No. of Primary Schools</th>
<th>Illiteracy rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North China</td>
<td>Hebei</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5,076</td>
<td>46,243</td>
<td>14.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast China</td>
<td>Liaoning</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3,517</td>
<td>14,386</td>
<td>12.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East China</td>
<td>Zhejiang</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3,444</td>
<td>19,700</td>
<td>17.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central South China</td>
<td>Guangdong</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4,795</td>
<td>24,700</td>
<td>6.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest China</td>
<td>Xinjiang</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2,090</td>
<td>6,962</td>
<td>24.68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Compiled from various Internet websites*

80 Ibid.
In the region’s administration too, though the Uyghurs hold some of the top positions, they have no real power. The region’s Party First Secretary is always a Han. These economic and political deprivations have fuelled enormous dissent among the Uyghurs contributing to a crystallization of the Uyghur identity in an “Us and them dichotomy” when confronted with the Han Chinese.81

Environmental concerns:

The Uyghurs are also exposed to environmental hazards. China’s nuclear weapon tests are conducted in Xinjiang’s Taklamakan desert. Starting from 1964 Chinese conducted some 45 nuclear test explosions in this area. This has caused environmental devastation, atmospheric pollution and ground water contamination.

Therefore, the role of the Chinese State has ignited the separatist notions among the Uyghurs. The Chinese State, in its goal of building China on the basis of Chinese nationalism in effect ignored the significant cause of the notions of ethnicity and of ethnic identity. In fact, Chinese definitions of nation and nationalities have no space for ethnic identity and therefore nationalist discourse in China has failed to address the minority issue. This plagues the Chinese nation today and allows the germination of ethnic nationalism. A brief survey of the Uyghurs under the Maoist regime and the post-Mao regime indicates how ethnic identity has been mishandled and misunderstood and lies at the root of the ethnic crisis afflicting Xinjiang today.

Nature of the Uyghur protest

Historically, the Uyghurs existed as an independent political entity in historical times and they, therefore, shared a kind of political identity even after their state disintegrated. This political aspiration along with their essentially Turkish descent defined their claim for independence. During the Qing rule, the Uyghur attempt at carving out their independent principality was in response to the weakening of the Chinese imperial state. The Xinjiang region principally served as a buffer zone for the Chinese empire. The buffer zones in Chinese history were mainly Tributary paying areas. Politically they were independent states and economically they benefited from the trade with the Chinese empire. In return for the lucrative economic relation, the buffer zones acknowledged the superiority of the Chinese State. In times of weak Chinese power these areas thrived as independent entities. Xinjiang in the Qing times was, however, turned into one of the provinces of the Chinese State. This incorporation of Xinjiang, which hitherto enjoyed independent political status, became the cause of unrest among the Uyghurs and other minorities. Further as Raphael Israeli wrote “when the degree of pressure from the host culture became so intense and threatening to the essence of their culture that it was counteracted by a parallel intensification of inner pressure for self-identity, the process leading to a head-on collision with the Chinese.”

Secondly, the Uyghur movement represents a concern for human rights. The human rights issues among the Uyghurs involve repressed civil-political rights, the rights to profess and propagate their religion, and live their culture and customs. Since the State’s policy of assimilation seeks to exterminate the minority

82 See Marc Mancall, China at the Center.
83 Raphael Israeli, p.143.
culture and identity, the Uyghur movement has appropriated the Western human rights strategy to battle against the Chinese State. Therefore, the Uyghur grievances have crystallized around political, cultural, economic and religious and environmental issues. The message from Yusuf Alptekin, the head of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organizations (UNPO) based in Sweden indicates that much of the protest by the Uyghurs represents Western liberal ideology pivoting around human rights issues. He says,

Since occupying Eastern Turkestan, Chinese Communist have pursued a policy of systematic assimilation of the country’s Turkic people in order to eliminate their culture and exterminate their beliefs. To speed this assimilation the Chinese Communists have encouraged mixed marriages, forced birth control and Chinese settlement in the area. The ever-growing Chinese population has brought unemployment, hunger and disaster to the people of Eastern Turkestan. Fundamental individual human rights and freedoms of the people’s of East Turkestan including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, continue to be violated by the Chinese Communists...if this policy is continued the peoples of Eastern Turkestan may well disappear from the historical scene within decades.84

This message from the diasporic Uyghur community raises concerns about the survival of Uyghur identity.

Third, from the 1990s onwards, there was a perceptible shift in the nature of the Uyghur movement. Although, the separatist tendency in Xinjiang is part of the region’s history, the element of violence in the movement does not predate 1986 when Uyghurs from the southern Kashgar area of the province first joined the anti-communist jihad in Afghanistan.85 During the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, the PRC is reported to have aided the People’s Resistance Forces or the Afghan Mujahideen with arms and money. The Renmin Ribao, (Hong Kong edition of 1985) reports, “it has been the Chinese people’s consistent and

84 Message From Isa Yusuf Alptekin, accessed from http://www.taklamakan.org/etib/etib1_1.html#2
unshakable stand to resolutely support the Afghan people in their just struggle and to demand that the Soviet Union withdraw its troops unconditionally.  

Against the Soviet threat, China supported the Afghan Mujahideen, scarcely realizing that these Afghan Mujahideen would help certain Uyghurs in Xinjiang in their separatist struggle. Due to the rise of militant Islamic ideology world-wide there has been the spurt of terrorist acts such as bomb explosions and assassination of those Uyghur who are collaborating with the government. In fact, the Chinese believe that “Western hostile forces have stepped up infiltration, separation and subversive activities in Xinjiang.” In 1989, limited quantities of weapons were first smuggled into Western Xinjiang. This showed the foreign involvement in the region bringing in guns, money and ideas to the hitherto silent protest of the Uyghurs. With this the “activities of ethnic separatism within the country’s boundary have entered a new active stage.” Therefore, to the Chinese authorities “ethnic separatism is a reactionary political stand, a reactionary social trend of thinking, and an actual reactionary behaviour aimed at creating ethnic separation and undermining the motherland’s unity”. From 1990s onwards the Chinese government gave up their hitherto secretive position about Xinjiang’s unrest and more and more reports came out urging Xinjiang’s stability. Xinjiang Ribao from Urumqi stated “unity among the nationalities is a prerequisite and guarantor for success in all fields of work in Xinjiang. Religion is closely related to stability and unity in the autonomous region. The major danger in Xinjiang comes from

domestic and international separatists of nationalities who usually stir up separatism and disturbances under the banners of nationalities and religion". 90

Besides the characteristic of violence that entered the Uyghur movement, the movement also came to be inspired by the concept of Jihad that the Afghan Mujahideen were practising. 91 In June 1997, Chinese officials in Xinjiang seized tons of explosives, arms and ammunitions from the Uyghur separatists. The Uyghur Chairman of the province revealed that the “party of Allah”, a fundamentalist Muslim party with about 1600 members, was in existence. 92 The Public Opinion Trend (POT) reports that Chinese officials are of the opinion that these militants were trained in Afghanistan and use Afghan heroin to fund their activities. Another Report from POT also stated that unlike Pakistan, militant Islamists from other countries in the region could not use their soil to train Islamic militants for Jihad. They look to the Taliban for such facilities, and the most recent of these, is a training camp south of Oxus river, reportedly set up by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) to train militants from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and the Western Chinese province of Xinjiang. 93 Post 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US added a new dimension of terrorism to the Uyghur movement. The Chinese State Council in January 2002 issued a detailed report "'East Turkestan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away With Impunity” which detailed the extent of terrorist activities since 1990. The report listed more than 200 incidents that resulted in 162 deaths and 440 injuries, and included bombings, assassinations, armed assaults on government organizations, establishing training bases and

91 Anthony Davis, Jane's Intelligence Review, p.420.
92 POT Afghanistan, Jan 6, 2000, p.17.
93 Ibid.
The Report also mentions the names of some internal terrorist organizations operating in Xinjiang, such as,

- Hazret's ETLO (East Turkistan Liberation Organization).
- The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)
- The Islamic Reformist party “Shock Brigade”
- The East Turkistan Islamic Party
- The East Turkistan Opposition Party
- The East Turkistan Islamic Party of Allah
- The Uyghur Liberation Organization
- The Islamic Holy Warriors
- The East Turkistan international Committee

There is little doubt that terrorist elements have percolated the Uyghur movement. In fact, four reasons account for the rise of terrorism. First, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that led to the creation of the Afghan Mujahideen and the Chinese support for the Mujahideen and the consequent role of the Uyghurs in the resistance. Second, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of independent Central Asian States and the consequent Islamic resurgence in the CIS that impacted on Xinjiang. Third, the rise of Taliban which influenced Xinjiang with its militant fundamentalist ideology and terrorism. Fourth, the PRC’s use of the Islamic card to portray itself as friendly to the Muslim countries in effect allowed Islamic influences to reach Xinjiang and contributed to the rise of Islamic separatist aspiration among the Uyghurs.

---


It may be pointed out that right from the 1930s and 1940s, down to the present times, Islam has played a major role in fomenting unrest. But as Raphael Israeli pointed out, “the rise of Muslim “nationalism” in contemporary China is perhaps more relevant to the ethnic, like the Galicians in Spain, or the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, who aspire to form their own nation of their ethnic group.96 Studying the different modes of Islamic influences in China on the Chinese Muslims it appears that the Uyghur Muslims who are traditionally Sunni Muslim have been largely influenced by Sufi orders, especially the Naqshbandiyya sect. It does not profess Wahabism of Arabia or the extremism found in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Raphael Israeli viewed that the Naqshbandiyya sect who dabbled in politics was not fundamentalist in nature. It was more a millenarian movement seeking to reestablish the lost world. The call for going back to the past did not indicate fundamentalism. It was revivalist in nature for it wanted to revive the past in order to set free from the present state of political, economic, cultural deprivation. Therefore, the Muslim rebellions in 19th century China had widespread appeal based on “deprivation” from which the rebellion promised to rescue them.97 Secondly, it may be pointed out that in many instances the intra-Muslim conflicts when confronted by the Chinese State, united among themselves and turned against the state. This happened in some of the Muslim rebellions in the Northwest, which transformed an intra-Muslim religious dispute into a large-scale ethnic conflict.98 The Uyghur conflict through out history has been an ethnic

---

97 Raphael Israeli, Muslims in China, p.184.
conflict based on Uyghur identity informed by Turkic descent and Islamic religion. The roots of the present unrest also lie in the government’s policies in the region rather than in the influence of foreign Islamic movements. None of the Uyghur diasporic websites while talking about human rights abuses in the region highlight religion or militant Islamic ideas as their ideology.\(^9^9\) In fact, many of them denounce extremism and profess non-violent protests. As Oetkur Umit says, “Search your religious roots and beliefs to draw strength for your struggle and carry out your struggle with the weapons of spiritual power and with the force of moral right and not with the destructive weapons of the world”.\(^1^0^0\) They also say that only few Uyghurs have resorted to terrorism and attempted to hijack the movement and give it a bad name. Further, they also say that the fact that a few resorted to violence does not mean that the movement is fundamentalist.

In fact, the nature of the Uyghur movement is essentially fragmented. This fragility has allowed the influence of several alien visions on the movement. While fragility of the movement explains its weakness, it also portrays that violence, terrorism, human rights, ethnicity are in effect only various means and ways to demonstrate the nature of unrest in the region. The unrest essentially points out that it is rooted in the Chinese State policies on nationalities. It demonstrates that the autonomy principle is rather faulty creating the scope for minority discontent.

It may be pointed out that through history unity among the Uyghurs had always been fragile. In the ancient times it was topography and oases-based settlements that precluded the Uyghurs from developing a sense of unity and this

---


\(^1^0^0\) Ibid.
topography impacted on the region to promote a “stubborn separatism”.\textsuperscript{101} Second, while Islam gave one common religion to the Muslim minorities, its various sects and different Sufi orders prevented the growth of unified Islamic identity. Third, language also was diverse among the various Muslims in the Xinjiang region. The Uyghurs identified themselves with the Turkic language, the Tajiks with Persian, Hui with Chinese and Mongols with the Aryan group. Therefore, the Muslims in the Xinjiang region possessed a rather fractured identity. In the 19th century taking advantage of this fractured identity, the region became prey to the “Great Game” between the Russians and Great Britain. In the post-colonial era, the region came under the Chinese Communists. In the post Cold War era, with the reemergence of identities and ethnic conflicts as major challenges in world politics, Xinjiang could not remain isolated. In fact, foreign powers and transnational movements have hijacked the Uyghur identity in the present times. Therefore, we find various strands of Uyghur identity today. Gaye Christoffersen identified five different visions constituting Uyghur identity.\textsuperscript{102}

1. Chinese Communist vision
2. Pan-Turkish vision
3. Pan-Islamic vision
4. Western Liberal vision
5. Uyghurstan Autonomy vision

The element of violence in the Uyghur movement is derived from the Pan-Turkish and Pan-Islamic vision and the groups representing these two visions have

---


appropriated the concept of Jihad to achieve their goal of freedom. The Western liberal vision is however, represented by the diasporic communities in the West. Their main plank of demands mainly highlight human rights and self-determination for the Xinjiang people through non-violent means. The minority nationality groups in Xinjiang, who have been co-opted within the Chinese government represent the Communist vision and they cooperate with the Chinese government in Han administration and economic development. They are the beneficiaries of the government and hence are opposed to any kind of separatism. The Uyghurstan autonomy vision is comprised of those people in Xinjiang who feel the brunt of Chinese discriminatory policies and demand genuine autonomy but not independence. These groups are a “silent majority” opposed to violence and supports a peaceful solution to the Uyghur issue within the parameters of the Chinese state.

The different influences on the Uyghur movement precluded the development of a unified strategy to fight the Chinese State. What emerges from this analysis of the Uyghurs through history is that given the inherent weaknesses and limitations among the Uyghurs in terms of their ethnic diversity, regional disparity, and geographical influences, the movement is bound to be fragile. This fragility is exacerbated in the event of their loose co-ordination, poor organization, lack of leadership and lack of common goal. Not all the Uyghurs want independence. They simply want greater autonomy. In addition to these weaknesses, the movement also fails to make much impact on account of the Uyghurs' identity with the Islamic religion. Unlike Buddhism in Tibet, Islam currently enjoys less sympathy around the world owing to the combination of
political Islam and extremism in many countries. Therefore, the fate of the movement is uncertain.

Further, in response to the separatist activity, the Chinese government has taken effective measures to quell the movement. The PRC has adopted a dual strategy. On the one hand, it has come down heavily on the Uyghurs with repressive measures. The April 2001 launching of the country’s most severe and extensive “Strike Hard” (Yan Da) campaign was part of the repression. On the other hand, China has adopted the Western Development policy since 1999 June to uplift the economic situation and thereby wean discontented Uyghurs from separatist tendencies. The project commits the Chinese leadership to promote large-scale infrastructure projects such as rail links, roads, and telecommunications essential for high-tech industrial growth. The announced plan is for investment of 420 billion renminbi (US $ 52 billion) in fixed assets during 2001-2005 in Xinjiang alone. Diplomatically, it stepped up efforts to build an anti-terrorism coalition. The Shanghai Five, later renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), is such a manifestation. The Shanghai Five that emerged as a forum to resolve border disputes in August 1999 took the task of discussing the threat to the Islamic Fundamentalism, drugs, and weapons spreading from war-torn Afghanistan and destabilizing Central Asia. The SCO summit in 2000 in Dushanbe agreed to add a military dimension to it with the creation of a joint counter terrorism center in Bishkek in order to meet the threat from the IMU and the Taliban. Thus, with the establishment of the SCO China not only eroded the Central Asian States’

105 Ibid.
sympathy for the Uyghurs but also portrayed China as a friendly nation to all the Muslim countries and indicated that China’s policies towards the Uyghurs are not anti-Muslim but are rather geared to the state’s security and national interest. Further, China continues to maintain close diplomatic ties with Pakistan and Iran, two countries often accused of aiding Islamic movements abroad. China’s policy of offering political and economic incentives to the Islamic states thus prevents them from supporting the Uyghur movement.

China will do whatever it can to retain Xinjiang. On account of its resource potential, nuclear sites, geo-political location and economic growth, the PRC will continue to give high priority to the region. A Xinjiang Ribao commentary notes that,

Xinjiang’s stability has a bearing on the stability of the whole country and Xinjiang’s development has a bearing on the development of the whole country. The important policy decision on Xinjiang’s stability made by the central authorities is both an ideological weapon guiding the people of all the nationalities in our region to realize long-term stability and development in Xinjiang, and an important part of the strategic overall situation of ensuring China’s modernization and unity.

Assessment

China regards Xinjiang as an integral part of China. It determinedly opposes all efforts against national disintegration and regards all separatist acts as “splittism”. This idea of splittism is rooted in China’s fear of the ‘century of humiliation’ inflicted upon it by the West. This fear has fuelled China’s notion of nationalism today that calls for reviving the past glory and achieving national

---

greatness. In this scheme Xinjiang's separatism has no place. In fact, as Suisheng Zhao pointed out, Chinese nationalism from the very beginning is related to the tension between ethnic nationalism and the creation of a multi-ethnic nation-state. The Chinese nationalists initially called for an end to the rule of the Manchu, a non-Han ethnic group, who were thought to be responsible for China's downfall. In order to forge a sense of common identity among the various population groups in China, Chinese scholars and intellectuals developed the idea of the Han majority to counter Western imperialist forces. In fact, under the influence of Darwinian thoughts that swept the globe in the twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals also evolved the notion of a superior race that of the Han people. Thus Sun Yatsen's *Three Principles of the People* outlines the racial theory underlying this notion wherein he says, 'the greatest force is common blood. The Chinese belong to the yellow race because they come from the bloodstock of the yellow race. The blood of ancestors is transmitted by heredity down through the race, making blood kinship a powerful force' The Han represented the yellow race and were regarded as the vanguard of the anti-Manchu nationalist movement. However, a more practical consideration prevailed upon Sun Yatsen to discard the racial card for unifying China. Sun Yatsen realized the fallacy of racial theory for it represented China as the nation belonging only to the Han and marginalizing other ethnic groups. Modern China needed to retain all the Qing territories in the new nation-state. The Qing territories comprised of Xinjiang, Tibet and Mongolia.

---


111 Quoted from ibid.

112 See, Suisheng Zhao, “Chinese Nationalism and Its International Orientations”. 
with populations consisting of non-Han groups. These were also areas on which control of China was crucial to its national security. In fact, throughout history China had been vulnerable to nomadic attacks from the Northwest. Thus, in order to control this strategic area and to bring the non-Han ethnic population within the fold of the new nation-state, Sun Yatsen evolved the idea of the “five peoples”. The successive Nationalists and Communists adopted the same principle of assimilation to conceive of China as a multi-ethnic country. Thus, the China White Paper on Minorities states, “The People's Republic of China is a united multi-ethnic state founded jointly by the people of all its ethnic groups”.

This creation of the concept of China as a multi-ethnic country is however, an artificial one, ignoring the realities of minority identity and minority culture. The Xinjiang problem is in fact, rooted in the distorted notion of Chinese nationalism that emerges from this. But the Chinese government in its avowed goal of unity, national security and modernization promoted nationalism to turn past humiliation and current weakness into motivation for modernization. Through the economic modernization of Xinjiang the CPC attempts to enlist the support of the minorities to the Party. However, despite economic growth in the region consequent to the Western Development programme, the region is poor and backward. Uyghurs have lower incomes than Hans, and their religious and identity consciousness is growing. The Regional Autonomy system is also a sham fuelling further unrest. Nationalism, which helped to fight the imperialist forces, has failed to build a nation state based on the true equality of all nationalities. Therefore, the present Chinese nationalism that seeks to promote mainly Han nationalism marginalizes the concerns of minority nationalities. This indicates the weakness of Chinese

---

113 See, Ibid.
nationalism. In this context, as one Chinese scholar observed, a strong policy of nationalism with inevitable emphasis on Han history and culture can only serve to accentuate ethnic and historical differences.\(^{114}\) Thus the CPC’s tool of nationalism, as a principle means to unify and integrate the diverse forces and consequently shore up the CPC’s waning ideology in the post-Communist world order seems to be a weak one.

\(^{114}\) Xiao gongxin, “Zhongguo Minzu Zhuyi de Lishi yu Qianjing” (The History and Prospect of Chinese Nationalism), Zhanlue yu Guanli (Strategy and management), 2, 1996, 61, quoted in Suisheng Zhao.