CONTINUING ETHNIC STRIFE IN XINJIANG: CHINA’S STRUGGLE WITH UYGHUR IDENTITY POLITICS

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Introduction

The Uyghurs are a Turkic Muslim ethnic group of about 8 million (0.6 % of China’s 1.3 billion) who inhabit Xinjiang, or “East Turkestan” as Uyghur activists call it. China’s leaders in Beijing aspire to connect coastal China, with its Han majority and vast market, to Europe via new rail links and other infrastructure. The growing economic and strategic importance of Xinjiang threatens Uyghur aspirations for independence or even ethnic autonomy. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, in recent years China has experienced a growing Han nationalism that threatens China’s minorities, Uyghurs included. This short essay attempts to survey the history of Uyghur issue since 1949, drawing upon new monographs and recent media reports of continuing unrest. Han Chinese economic and demographic penetration of Xinjiang has led to violence, which only adds to the reductionist view of Uyghurs as potential terrorists in the minds of many Chinese. A peaceful and fair resolution to the state-building challenges faced by Uyghurs seems as far off as ever.

Identity and the State

Almost all “nations” are multi-ethnic. Unlike empires, they in theory represent a fictive homogenous “people.” Even Japan, which claims homogeneity, has ethnic groups including Okinawans, Koreans, and the Ainu. Only Iceland, with only 270,000 citizens, about the size of Chattanooga, Tennessee, is truly a homogenous nation-state, threatened more by violent eruptions than ethnicity.

In the case of an “empire-nation” such as China, political stability requires subordination of regional, cultural, and ethnic claims to a higher identity. Stronger identification with an ethnic group can cause conflict within the nation-state, or “splitism” as the CCP terms it. Because ethnic claims seek a reversal of the historic process of “conquest,” they pose a danger to the geographic integrity of the state, as well as economic danger in cases where valuable local mineral or other resources are claimed by the state (Friedman 2000, 147). This is the case in both Xinjiang and Tibet.

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Frontier ethnic groups, located on the geographic margins of the nation-state, are more difficult to sustain if their economic systems depend upon transhumance or communities widely scattered over space. According to Rudelson, local “oasis identity” has prevented Uyghurs from uniting in Xinjiang, although recent work by Rian Thum postulates a “modular” proto-nationalism (Rudelson 1997; Thum 2016). The “oasis identity” paradigm argued that the scattered Uyghur communities around the Tarim basin were too disparate to build a national discourse. In contrast, Thum argues that religious texts and traditional pilgrimages created a Uyghur identity by the 18th century. This challenges the view of Uyghur nationalism as a product of a Soviet meeting in Tashkent in 1921.

Urban centers are important for cultural preservation and promotion: Antwerp, Ghent, and Bruges for the Flemings, Barcelona for the Catalans, Amritsar for the Sikhs, and Mosul for the Kurds. Kashgar can be considered the urban center for the Uyghurs, the Xinjiang capital of Urumqi being a predominantly Han city (Mikesell and Murphy 1991, 586).

Diasporas also have long been a source of elite ethnonationalism. Sometimes diaspora motivates people to define their identities in a foreign setting: Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh, Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, India’s Mohandas Gandhi, and Pakistan’s Mohammad Ali Jinnah all began to formulate national identities abroad, and this has been true of diaspora Uyghurs (Fair 2006). Given Chinese suppression of Uyghur religious and political life – increasingly linked to pan-Islamic unrest – expat Uyghur groups abroad influence the discourse of identity politics well beyond their numbers by utilizing the social power of the internet and other technology. However, as we shall see, no diaspora leader has been able to unite and mobilize Uyghurs to challenge the dominance of the Chinese state.

**Uyghur History and Identity**

A shared history and ethnic background, real or “imagined,” are fertile if not always essential grounds for creating ethnic political identity, but for contemporary Uyghurs, the “invention” of their history is problematic (Horowitz 1985, 681-684). The Uyghur ethnonym really dates from the 1930s when the Chinese Republic, or rather the Han warlord Sheng Shicai, defeated a short-lived (1931-1933) self-proclaimed Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkistan. After 1949, the PRC gave minority ethnic status to the oasis dwellers of Xinjiang, but they also recognized other ethnic groups in this vast region: the Tungans, Kazaks, Mongols, Kyrghiz, Tajik, and Sibe. Uyghurs, although the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang until the 1950s, have not been able to forge a single ethnic nationalism due to ethnic diversity, political differences between urban secular activists and rural Islamic movements, and the centralist policy of the PRC after 1949. Class distinctions between peasants, merchants, and intellectuals are strong. Urban
Uyghurs see rural Uyghurs as backward, a view shared by most Han, who in recent years see all Uyghurs as jihadists.

Since the early 1950s the PRC has encouraged Han migration. In 1949, there were only 300,000 Han in Xinjiang, but by 2003 there were about 8.25 million, outnumbering the indigenous Uyghurs. According to the 2010 census, Xinjiang now has 21.8 million, with three million in the capital of Urumqi. Uyghurs are now a minority of 45.84%; Han 40.48%; Kazakh 6.50%; Hui 4.51%, and others 2.67%. Only Tibet has a higher per cent of ethnic minorities (Census 2010). These official figures probably underestimate the Han population of Xinjiang as some “temporary workers” are in fact long-term residents. (Government White Paper 2003).

In the capital of Urumqi, the ratio of Han/Uyghur residents has shifted even more dramatically from 20:80 to 80:20, creating an urban island of mostly Han residents. Uyghurs have become a minority in their own homeland, with growing resentment due to resource extraction, environmental stress (especially water demands) and Han workers taking the lion’s share of new jobs.

Most Uyghurs live on the fringes of the Tarim basin, which is approximately 600 miles wide and 250 miles north to south. The oases differ in size and population, from as small as 20,000 to 750,000 in Kashgar. Kashgar is close to the Ferghana valley, and it has strong Central Asian influences, including identity ties with Islamic radicalism in the region. Khotan and other oases along the southern Tarim Basin look to India and Pakistan for historic contact and modern trade. The Hui, Muslims who speak Chinese, are sometimes cultural intermediaries between Uyghurs and the Chinese, but there is also great tension between Hui and Uyghurs; they tend to live in different parts of the cities and worship at separate mosques (Rudelson 1997, 39-69). Despite the fact that the Hui were long accepted throughout China, growing Han nationalism in recent years, coupled with Uyghur terrorist attacks, has led to growing suspicion of the Hui communities in Chinese cities.

In the confusion of war with Japan and the civil war in China (1945-1949) following Japan’s surrender, Uyghurs in the Ili region near the Soviet (now Kazakhstan) border revolted and established the Eastern Turkestan Republic (ETR). Taking advantage of the political vacuum and chaos of the war, this marked “…the most significant indigenous independence movement in this century” for the Uyghurs (Rudelson 1997, 29). Supported with arms, air support, and money by Beria and Stalin, the leaders of the short-lived (1944-1949) republic called for a pan-Turkic state encompassing Xinjiang as well as parts of the Soviet Union. The fragile Nationalist government signed an accord with the ETR granting many rights, including freedom of expression and universal suffrage, but a coalition government of Chinese and ETR officials fell apart in 1947 when Chinese officials violated the accord.
The ETR remained independent until the death of their leaders in a suspicious plane crash en route to a meeting with Mao and other Chinese Communist leaders. In 1949, after the creation of the PRC, the Chinese army reasserted Han control. In 1962, due to the economic disaster of the Great Leap Forward, 60,000-120,000 Uyghurs and Kazaks fled to the Soviet Union.

Treatment of Uyghurs under the Communist Party since 1949 has been driven by radical policy shifts rather than consistent adherence to law respecting minority rights. Zhou Enlai made it clear that while the CCP would recognize minorities, the PRC was a republic, not a federation. Uyghur leaders faced limited options: flight, imprisonment, or execution. Beijing recognized fifty-six official nationalities with seats in the National People’s Congress, but unlike the Nationalists, they had no need to make real concessions to ethnic groups. The “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” today lacks a Uyghur majority or any real political autonomy (Jacobs 2016, 171-174).

The most important tool of the CCP in Xinjiang by early 1950s was the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Xinjiang Shengchan Jianshe Bingtuan), a Han dominated organization that brought millions of Han migrants into Xinjiang, including demobilized Communist and captured Nationalist soldiers. The bingtuan created cultural and demographic ties to the inner provinces of China and thwarted Uyghurs hoping for a nation-state based on ethnocultural homogeneity. Unlike the USSR, the PRC had no intention of creating “national republics” with the right of secession (Jacobs 2016, 174-178). Because most bingtuan were in agricultural sites or new industrial boomtowns far from existing Uyghur communities, ethnic conflict was minimal during the Mao years, although Uyghur intellectuals were attacked during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and expression of ethnic identity or Uyghur autonomy was harshly suppressed. Uyghur refugee numbers in Afghanistan swelled to 12,000.3 The events in Tiananmen Square in 1989 led once more to party suppression of “splitism” and in response there was a flurry of violent Uyghur protest which peaked in the mid-1990s (Rudelson 1997, 141).

Problems of Ethnic Identity among the Uyghurs

Writer Peter Hessler sums up the identity problem as well as anyone:

“…a small, remote group like the Uighurs were almost never perceived on their own terms. The Chinese saw them as ethnic minorities of the People’s Republic; Turkic groups saw them as Turks; Islamic fundamentalists saw them as Islamic; Senator Helms saw them as anti-China and pro-American…there was so little information about them that anybody could remake the ethnic grouping in his own image” (Hessler 2006, 375-376).4

Most Uyghur intellectuals live in the capital of Urumchi, largely populated by Chinese (85%) who employ them at government institutions. Although part of the state bureaucracy, they are not fully accepted by their Chinese colleagues. Some have
internalized and accept the Chinese negative stereotypes of rural Uyghurs, especially those who live in the Tarim oases.

Educated Uyghurs must choose between sending their children to Uyghur language schools with a link to their traditional culture, or to Mandarin schools where they might assimilate and advance their careers by entering the structure of Chinese state. Unlike Uyghurs in Kashgar who assert their links to Islam, “…the majority of Uyghur intellectuals is highly nationalistic and strongly rejects Islamic conservatism” (Rudelson 1997, 119). Following the break-up of Soviet Union after 1991, Uyghurs were encouraged by the emergence of Islamic states across the border. However, even to suggest autonomy is subject to ten years imprisonment. The appearance of potential charismatic leaders makes them liable to “reeducation camps” or worse.

This leaves only anarchy and violence as a form of resistance. It is difficult to suppress entirely because it rejects organization and is often spontaneous. Combined with the recent nihilism of militant Islam, anarchy is perhaps the greatest potential threat yet to Chinese control of Xinjiang. Suppression of social and political organization among the Uyghurs makes anarchism attractive to dissidents (King 1997, 102; Dautcher 2009).

Ethnic Protest in the 1990s

In April 1990 Uyghurs and Kirgyz near Kashgar protested central government limits on mosque construction and birth control policies. Reportedly, fifty were killed as Xinjiang was closed to outsiders for several months. The Chinese government claimed, in September 1991, that weapons were being smuggled in from Afghanistan and Pakistan by militants. There were indeed some Uyghurs willing to use terrorist tactics: in February 1992 six died in a bus bomb in Urumchi. In the summer of 1993 three were killed by a bomb in Kashgar. In 1995, apparently police provoked a riot in Khotan when streets were full of mosque worshippers.

The peak of violence and unrest was 1996-1997. In 1996 a worried government in Beijing announced the national anti-crime “Strike Hard” campaign, but it had an ethnic impact in Xinjiang, where it tried to prevent any hint of separatist thought. Details are skimpy, but some Uyghurs were killed by police in Kucha: 2,700 “terrorists,” murderers, criminals and weapons were seized in Xinjiang. In reaction to the crackdown, Uyghurs rose with unprecedented civil protest, violence, and terrorist acts. On February 5-6 in the town of Ili, 100 students waved East Turkestan Republic flags. Thirty-one were killed by police and 200 wounded. There were reports of ten more anti-Chinese protests in Ili, one involving 5,000 people. The new aggressive Chinese policy was met by equally violent Uyghur reactions.

On February 12 Uyghur separatists derailed a train enroute to Urumchi filled with mostly Chinese passengers. On February 25 three Urumchi buses were bombed to coincide with Beijing funeral of Deng Xiaoping. These terrorist acts killed 23 and injured 74 victims. Ten days later, a pipe bomb allegedly planted by Uyghurs on a bus in a busy
shopping district brought the violence to Beijing itself. There were warnings of further attacks from Uyghur groups in exile. Although Beijing may have exaggerated the threat of Uyghur separatism, it is clear that “Eastern Turkestan forces” had engaged in violent terrorist acts, with 162 reported killed and 440 wounded (Shichor 2005, 120-121).

Local police were sufficient to stifle the unrest, and by 1998 incidents of violence died down. Border defense expenditures and troop deployment suggests a low level of concern, even though the U.S. was building air bases and stationing troops in three bordering Central Asian states (Shichor 2004). The South China Sea, Senkaku Islands, and Taiwan have received much more attention in recent years than the inner Asia borderlands.

The Post 9/11 “Terrorism”

Despite the relative peace after 1998 in Xinjiang, following the attacks on 9/11 the Chinese press and officials stopped calling Uyghur dissidents “Xinjiang separatists” and began using the more foreign sounding ominous term, “East Turkestan terrorists.” China was now among those threatened by Islamic terrorists from outside and a partner in the greater “war on terrorism.”

By associating all Uyghurs discontent with terrorism, China was able to conflate domestic human rights issues with external threats of violence. Shortly after 9/11 Beijing said: “The United States has asked China to provide assistance against terrorism. China, by the same token, has reasons to ask the United States to give its support and understanding in the fight against terrorism and separatism.” The Bush administration agreed to designate the ETIM a terrorist group, eroding the Uyghur view of U.S. as benevolent supporter of their human rights claims (New York Times December 22, 2002).

Utilizing Radical Islam

The campaign against separatism initiated in 1997 targeted "three evils": extremism, splitters, and terrorism; since 9/11 the state calls any religious expression outside of state control terrorism. This makes it difficult for Uyghurs to appeal to human rights standards in a world increasingly hostile to radical Islam. Beijing has magnified acts of violence to justify suppression of any peaceful political dissent or religious independence. Many groups besides the ETIM have been listed on Beijing’s "East Turkestan Terrorist List (New York Times, December 22, 2002). According to Human Rights Watch, Xinjiang leads the nation in executions for state security “crimes,” with over 200 executed from 1997 to 2005 (Human Rights Watch 2005). Many writers and scholars have been given long prison sentences on trumped up charges of “separatism” (Human Rights Watch 2004).

In January 2003, Xinjiang Party Secretary Wang Laquan noted that the PRC would deal harshly with Uyghur separatists: “Xinjiang will always keep up the intensity
of its crackdown on ethnic separatist forces and deal them devastating blows without showing any mercy” (Human Rights Watch 2004). In November 2004, China passed rigorous new national religious rules, effective March 1, 2005. Officially these protect “freedom of religious belief” and regulate “the administration of religious affairs,” but the effect is to stifle beliefs that are not approved by the government. The new national law is very similar to earlier rules in Tibet, and it also applies to non-Muslim Han groups like the Falun Gong.

Since 9/11 all believers are suspect as schools were purged, publications controlled, and non-conformist Mosques were torn down. Only mosques under government supervision are allowed, and children and young adults cannot receive religious training. Driven underground, secret meetings and religious education is now held in homes (Dautcher 2009).

China’s attempt to suppress Islam may be counter-productive as religious expression goes underground into more radical forms of religious identity. This no doubt will lead to a nasty cycle of further government suppression of human rights in Xinjiang and more violence. It is true that some Uyghurs were found fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and twenty-two ended up in Guantanamo, but they cannot be said to represent the eight million Uyghurs. Yet they have been demonized in the Chinese press, just as Muslims in general have been treated by Trump as dangerous adversaries in the “war on terrorism” (Human Rights Watch 2004a).

The Leadership Problem

Unlike Tibet, which has the popular and very visible Dali Lama as a spokesman, there is no Uyghur leader who commands both ethnic support and international recognition by political leaders and movie stars. China has taken pains to prevent a charismatic leader from emerging. Perhaps the most egregious case is that of Rebiyah Kadeer, a Uyghur businesswoman, an unusual achievement. Kadeer was well-known as the CCP used her success as an entrepreneur as a poster child of tolerance for Uyghurs. Kadeer had been appointed a member of the provincial level Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, but in 2000 she was convicted under Article 111 of Chinese law of "passing state intelligence" to her exiled husband: copies of public newspapers. Suffering from medical conditions in prison, Kadeer was released in March 2005, after serving five and half years of her eight year sentence she joined her husband in exile in Washington D.C. In May, Chinese police arrested family members and associates of Kadeer in Urumqi, beat employees, and raided the company offices.

Violence Since 2009

In concluding his recent book on Uyghur nationalism, David Brophy sums up the situation: “In an environment where many Uyghurs feel that all they have left is religious
faith, repressive religious policies will inevitably create the necessary conditions to redefine the struggle in Xinjiang as a jihad” (Brophy 2016, 275).

Fearing terrorism, the government does not allow Uyghurs to work at airports or drive fuel trucks. Han are given preference in hiring, and their fluency in Mandarin gives them a near monopoly of government jobs. Mutual dislike leads to continued outbreaks of violence, both in Xinjiang and other parts of China with Uyghur diasporas (Uyghur Unrest 2017).9

Following the deaths of two Uyghur workers during a factory dispute in Guangdong, Han were attacked by Uyghur mobs in Urumchi on July 2009. Leaving the Uyghur quarter, they attacked Han neighborhoods with clubs and knives. The police were unwilling to intervene, but Han vigilantes retaliated in the following days. It was reported that 192 were killed and 1,721 injured in the communal fighting. The government claimed that most victims were Han (New York Times July 18, 2009; October 8, 2013). Failure of Chinese ethnic policy has created a lethal atmosphere of coercion and fear.

Uyghur terrorists were responsible for a highly visible car attack in Tiananmen Square on October 28, 2013, that killed five people, including three of the Uyghurs in the vehicle; 38 others were injured. Uyghurs said restrictions on religious expression, including the wearing of veils, ignited the violence. The government contends that wearing the veil is "linked with illegal religious activities and the infiltration of extremist religious thinking" (Economist on-line 2013).

On March 1, 2014, an even more gruesome attack by eight knife and meat cleaver-wielding Uyghurs killed 29 and injured 143 people in the main train station of Kunming, a major city in China's south-west. At the scene, police killed four assailants and captured one injured female. Chinese officials called the attackers terrorists, and said evidence linked them to Xinjiang. Although no one claimed responsibility for the Kunming attack or the car attack in Tiananmen, police blamed "China's September 11th" on Uyghurs. The attack shocked China and prompted a call from Xi Jinping "to crack down on violent terrorist activities in all forms” (Economist on-line 2014).

On September 18, 2015, a group of knife-wielding men in Aksu attacked sleeping workers at a coalmine where at least 50 were killed. The Turkistan Islamic Party claimed responsibility for the attack, calling the perpetrators "mujahideen." By November 18, Chinese security forces cornered the attackers in a mountain hideout. Twenty-eight were killed, and the sole survivor surrendered to authorities, who used flamethrowers and gunned them down as they emerged (New York Times 2015). Mass-scale acts of terror, such as was seen in Kunming, have been rare in China. But long-simmering social tension between Uyghurs and Han Chinese has flared in the wake of that attack. Small scale conflicts became all too common in 2015 and 2016 as Xinjiang authorities cracked down, sometimes killing Uyghurs who just looked suspicious.
Growing Han Nationalism

China has long had a sense of cultural superiority. Recently Han nationalism has grown, threatening the relationship of the home provinces with ethnic minority borderlands: Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Yunnan. Han Chinese increasingly view being “Chinese” as belonging to the 1.2 billion Han, which leaves the 110 million minorities as “others.” Sun Yat-sen spoke of “common blood” as he attempted the difficult task of creating a modern nation out of a Qing potpourri of languages, traditions, and beliefs. Xi Jinping continues this argument as he seeks to incorporate Hong Kong and Taiwan, and has even appealed to the Chinese diaspora overseas in a 2014 speech: “Generations of overseas Chinese never forget their home country, their origins or the blood of the Chinese nation flowing in their veins.” Just as the conservative right in Israel would equate citizenship with being Jewish, “the conflation of Han and national identity underlies the uneasy relationship between the majority and China’s ethnic-minority citizens” (Economist 2016, November 19).

Even though in official discourse all minorities are treated as equals, and even received special privileges such exception from as the one-child policy, they are marginalized. In Xinjiang, where in-migration of Han population since 1949 has been massive, Uyghurs are easily identified and discriminated against. They are depicted in official publications as an exotic and backward as compared to the modern and progressive Han. Reportedly, a museum in Urumqi has an exhibit of “Xinjiang Nationalities,” in which the only model in modern clothes is Han (Economist 2016, November 19).

Traditional Uyghur customs have been criminalized. Children are not allowed religious instruction until they are eighteen, and then only in government-approved mosques. Long beards are forbidden, and government employees may not fast during Ramadan. Observant shop owners have been forced to stock alcohol. When Uyghur traders or workers travel to the rest of China, they are often denied hotel rooms (ID cards state ethnicity). Terrorist attacks in coastal China in recent years have led to even greater suspicion of Uyghurs. As in America, Islamophobia is rising, and Xi himself has warned of “illegal religious infiltration activities” (Economist 2016, November 19).

In 2014 Beijing, worried about “splitism,” during Ramadan, carried out house-to-house searches, looking for books or clothing that might show “conservative” religious beliefs. Women wearing veils were widely detained, and many young men arrested on the slightest pretext. Students and civil servants were forced to eat instead of fasting, and they were expected to work or attend classes instead of attending Friday prayers. In recent years, such scrutiny perhaps has led to more resistance to Han rule rather than less. By failing “…to distinguish positive expressions of Uyghur identity from elements they see as symptoms of pan-Turkism or pan-Islamic sympathies,” the PRC attacks legitimate “…symbols of Uyghur identity” (Brophy 2016, 274-275). Unsupervised underground mosques have appeared as elders returning from the Hajj have brought back more
conservative ideas. Radical Islam has appealed to some Uyghur youth with high levels of unemployment and discrimination against them (Denyer, 2014).

**Conclusion: A Dismal Future?**

As Han nationalism grows, the PRC is redefining the discourse, turning from “…a multinational state to China as a multi-ethnic nation-state, with a renewed emphasis on the existence of a single Chinese nation” (Brophy 2016, 276). Although granting some genuine autonomy in Xinjiang might make ethnic identity and radical Islam less appealing to many Uyghurs, China’s strategic and energy problems rule this out. Concessions to limited Uyghur autonomy might have a negative impact on minority issues in Tibet and other frontiers, including Taiwan. Diaspora Uyghurs have utilized their websites on the internet to maintain some visibility, although there is disagreement on goals and leadership. It is highly unlikely that Uyghurs will obtain national determination in any meaningful way given coastal China’s need to secure the borderlands, including Tibet, Mongolia, and Taiwan. Perhaps the transnational appeal of Islam or the historic ties of Turkic culture will be more viable than the nation-state model in the distant future (Jacobs 2016, 238).

In the near future, China’s control over the Uyghurs seems secured by international security agreements and the police power of the state. However, further economic development and Han immigration will add more environmental stress to an already tense ethnic conflict. The economic integration of Xinjiang via transportation, communication, pipelines, satellites is growing stronger. Lacking a breakdown of the Chinese political system, an unlikely prospect, the only hope for Uyghurs is less discrimination.11 A greater share in the growing Xinjiang energy economy might help, but most jobs in the growing oil and water sector are filled by Han Chinese. Human rights discourse, not political independence or radical Islam, might be the only viable path to peaceful co-existence (Shichor 2005, 133).12 But in the age of Trump, international diplomatic support of human rights discourse is problematic, to say the least. However, the Han-centric world view of a state that does not respect equality or civil rights is likely to continue discrimination against ethnic minorities, even though may well make pan-Islamic or pan-Turkic separatism even more appealing to the Uyghur people.

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1My thanks for the constructive suggestions of an anonymous reviewer; remaining issues are my own. There has been a recent flourishing of new and important books on the Uyghurs. I include them in the references, but one should not miss the excellent and detailed review by Ildiko Beller-Hann in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76:4 (November 2017) pp. 1092-1100, where she contextualizes five of them in the discourse on Uyghur history. I review two of the authors (Brophy and Jacobs) in *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 39 (2017), pp. 161-164.
Archival research (Jacobs 2016) reveals the extent of Soviet intervention in Xinjiang, including the Ili Rebellion. See his Chapter 4, 127-168. In contrast to Rudelson 1997, Thum 2012, 635, argues that various texts, or tazkirah, and the tradition of pilgrimages to sometimes distant shrines in Altishari (southern Xinjiang) created a pre-nationalist, non-elitist “…shared identity across wide desert wastes, long before the arrival of nationalism.” Thum elaborates this history in his book: Thum 2014. However, there was no shared ethnonym before 1930.

By way of contrast, 80,000 Tibetans had followed the Dalai Lama to India in 1959. No Uyghur leader in exile has commanded the following and attention that is given the Dalai Lama (Jacobs 2016, 221).

Yitzhak Shichor, 2005, pp. 119-135, notes the various agents which manipulate reality in Xinjiang to create perceptions, to create a “virtual” situation of ethnic tension rather than the real one. He argues that both the Chinese government and various Uyghur groups manipulate reports – information on the ground is difficult to get – to create an artificial discourse for “…not only the public but, more important, policymaking agencies such as foreign governments, parliaments, commissions, and NGOs – and some academics and researchers.” (131).

Hessler 2006, 374. He notes that conservatives like Senator Jesse Helms resisted the reclassification of Uyghurs as terrorists: “…there is no justification in lumping the Uighers with the murderous fanatics who demonstrably mean us harm. The Uighurs are engaged in a just struggle for freedom from Beijing’s tyrannical rule, for the most part peacefully…” (p.375).

For example, groups advocating independence (but not violence) such as the World Uyghur Youth Congress and the East Turkestan Information Center are listed as terrorist organizations.

Uyghurs point out that various pejorative terms have been used since the founding of the PRC to describe them: feudal elements and ethnic nationalists in the 1950s and 1960s; counter-revolutionaries in the 1970s and 1980s; separatists in the 1990s; and since 2001, terrorists.

Her husband had been jailed for political activity and was exiled in 1996. Article 111: Whoever steals, secretly gathers, purchases, or illegally provides state secrets or intelligence for an organization, institution, or personnel outside the country is to be sentenced from not less than five years to not more than 10 years of fixed-term imprisonment; when circumstances are particularly serious, he is to be sentenced to not less than 10 years of fixed-term imprisonment, or life sentence, and when circumstances are relatively minor, he is to be sentenced to not more than five years of fixed-term imprisonment, criminal detention, control, or deprivation of political rights.

The many large and small outbreaks of Uyghur and police violence that have created a lethal atmosphere of coercion and fear.

This patronizing view of minorities is not unusual. For the Japanese case, see my “Ainu Submergence and Emergence: Human Rights Discourse and the Expression of Ethnicity in Japan,” Southeast Review of Asian Studies 27 (Fall 2006) 9-27. Until the opening of the Museum of the American Indian on the mall in Washington, museums generally presented pre-modern indigenous culture. In the last few decades, the rise of

11 While some see strains on the Chinese political system as the economy grows, Andrew Nathan (2003) argues that the leadership of the CCP will cope with change.

12 Shichor offers a very negative view in calling for a redefinition of “self-determination” to stop short of independence. While reasonable in the present geopolitical climate, ethnic claims in other time and places have frequently not been noted for reasonable compromise. In that ethnicity is a product of emotional attachment as much as rational calculation, Shichor may be too idealistic in proposing a middle ground.

References


Shichor, Yitzhak. 2004. “The great wall of steel: Military and strategy in Xinjiang” in S. Frederick Starr (Editor). Xinjiang: China’s muslim borderland. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe. This volume, which includes most of the important scholars working on Xinjiang, is essential reading.


