Beijing Rides the Bandwagon: A Critical Analysis of Islam and Separatism in Xinjiang

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical assessment of the Chinese Communist Party's post-9/11 efforts to build international support for its security activities in its Xinjiang province. Xinjiang has traditionally presented the party with a particular challenge. It is remote and relatively underdeveloped, has borders with seven countries,[1] and, most importantly, is inhabited by a large, concentrated, and restive Islamic minority known as the Uygurs. The party is very concerned about the presence of separatist elements among the Uygur population. Beijing's activities to control such elements have traditionally been quite secretive. However, after 9/11, a Beijing-released report claimed that Xinjiang's separatist activity is Islamist in nature and that groups operating within the region have ties to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. I argue that inconsistencies surrounding this report tend to undermine the party's position. Furthermore, given the nature of Islamic practice in Xinjiang and the historical development of Uygur-Han relations in the region, it is more likely that the primary motivations for separatism are rooted in ethno-nationalist, rather than religious, considerations.

Introduction

Representing the world's most visible vestige of authoritarianism and imperialism has often left the People's Republic of China (PRC) at odds with the

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norms of the greater international community. There is irony to be found, then, in Beijing's recent efforts to involve the international community in its ongoing struggle with Uygur separatist elements in Xinjiang. While the proportional mix of genuine apprehension to opportunistic justification remains unclear, it is quite apparent that Beijing is riding the American-led anti-Islamist propaganda wave to gain international acquiescence to its continued human rights offenses in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR – henceforth "Xinjiang").

That separatist elements, some of them with Islamist agendas, exist in Xinjiang is not at issue here. Rather, this paper argues that Beijing's concern over Islamist separatism in Xinjiang (be it sincere or contrived) is overstated. Indeed, Beijing's own reporting on the extent and cohesion of violence there has often been exaggerated and contradictory, especially the tenuous claims that regional elements have connections to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Beyond such inconsistencies, the nature of Uygur discontent tends to suggest that the primary motivations for separatism are rooted in ethno-nationalist, rather than religious, considerations. Furthermore, it is likely that the imbalanced and generally repressive nature of Han-Chinese rule in the region[2] has prompted much of the current separatist sentiment. Prior to threshing out this paper's key arguments, however, it is perhaps prudent to consider why China is so keen on keeping Xinjiang and, moreover, why it might feel the need to gain international acquiescence to its security activities in the region.

Beijing on Xinjiang

While it is beyond the scope of this work to detail in full the Chinese Communist party's (CCP) interest in holding on to Xinjiang, it is important here to briefly discuss a few of the more relevant points. First, Xinjiang is about half the size of India and lies between central China and Central Asia. This makes it strategically important, both as a trade route and as a buffer zone. The Manchus and the Romanovs fought for control of it, as did the Nationalists (KMT) during their brief tenure. The CCP, then, is unlikely to hand it over to the Uygurs. Second, the region holds vast reserves of coal, oil, and natural gas, for which the pubescent Chinese economy hungers.[3] Third, and perhaps most important, the CCP has much at stake in the way of legitimacy when it comes to maintaining the empire.

Not so long ago, the Chinese coast was carved up by the Europeans and later by the Japanese. Remedying the "century of shame" has been an important element of the CCP's claim to leadership since the PRC's inception, making any separatist movement anathema. The recent showcasing of Bei-

jing's planned Taiwan anti-secession bill[4] is clear evidence of this.[5] Also, the days of big-poster charisma are long gone, for while ideology cannot buy the regime support, a strong economy and coercion can. The Chinese economy is doing very well, but pockets of political resistance are ever-present and accommodating them shows a lack of control and weakness. As such, the CCP exercises widespread moderate repression, complemented by incidental heavy repression, so that no significant dissent or non-state organization (e.g., the Falun Gong), can exist. Indeed, it appears to adhere well to the old Chinese adage "Kill a chicken to warn all the monkeys."[6] The methods used to consolidate its hold over Xinjiang are no exception to the rule, and human rights abuses in the region abound.

While it is impossible to discuss all of these abuses, an attempt will be made to give an overview. Xinjiang remains one of the few provinces where the execution of political prisoners is common: Between January 1997 and April 1999, Amnesty International documented 210 death sentences and 190 executions.[7] To put this in nationwide perspective, Uygurs account for only 0.7 percent of the Chinese population but, in 1999, accounted for 4.43 percent of China's total executions that year.[8] Rights of due process are not generally afforded, confessions are often extracted by torture, and arrests are often arbitrary because China does not distinguish between criminal and political disobedience.[9] As in the rest of the country, the CCP allows very little freedom of religion in Xinjiang. A 1998 law passed by the Xinjiang Communist Party Committee and the XUAR government states that religious leaders are expected to "stand on the side of the government firmly and express their viewpoints unambiguously," and attend "patriotic education courses." In May 2001, seven imams were arrested for organizing "underground mosques"; however, the charges were not made public.[10]

This law also restricts freedom of association and expression. Registered social groups have been subject to "rectification drives," with 131 being closed down between 1996 and 1999. Cases like that of Osman Yimit, sentenced to seven years in prison for "engaging in separatist activities" for running an unregistered aid fund for poor families, are common. In January 2001, Xinjiang Party Committee Secretary Wang Lequan warned journalists that "our media absolutely does not allow any noise that counteracts the party's voice" and that "journalists should remember the principle of news reports serving the party and socialism."[11] Finally, any significant rallies or protests are generally put down swiftly and severely. For example, after the arrest of a third consecutive imam from the Baytulla mosque in Khotan in 1995, a crowd converged on the local party and government compound to demand information on his whereabouts. The government responded by

calling in "large numbers of riot police who trapped the demonstrators in the compound, deployed tear gas, and arrested and beat many of them."[12] None of Beijing's policies in Xinjiang have been good for the international image of an increasingly integrated Chinese economy. Fortunately for Beijing, however, a modicum of absolution has recently become available.

The PRC-SCIO Document

On 21 January 2002, the PRC's State Council Information Office (PRC-SCIO) released "East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get away with Impunity," a document cataloging violent acts that Beijing alleges have been committed by separatist groups in Xinjiang.[13] Representing Beijing's first public acknowledgement of the extent of anti-state activity in Xinjiang, it attempts to draw links between heightened disorder there and international militant Islamist organizations. Central to the document is the claim that Osama "bin Laden has schemed with the heads of Central and West Asian terrorist organizations many times to help the East Turkestan forces in Xinjiang launch a holy war with the aim of setting up a theocratic Islamic state in Xinjiang."[14] The Taliban are also implicated as collaborators with and suppliers of separatist elements. Beyond these dubious claims of al-Qaeda and Taliban involvement with Uygur separatists (discussed in the next section), there are several reasons to be suspicious of this document.

The first major problem is related to how the document categorizes the various separatist groups. Available data on them is limited, but the following list provides an idea of the breadth of alleged organizations within the separatist movement[15]: the East Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO), the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the East Turkistan Party, the Uygur Liberation Organization (ULO), the Xinjiang Liberation Organization, the United Revolutionary Front of Eastern Turkistan, the Organization for the Liberation of Uygurstan, the Wolves of Lop Nor, the Home of East Turkistan Youth, the Free Turkistan Movement, the Party of Allah, the World Uygur Youth Congress (WUYC), the Uygurstan People's Party, and the Islamic Uygur Party.[16]

These groups represent a diversity of religious and secular orientations and tend to gravitate toward two poles. One is in the region's western part, near the Kazakhstan border, around Yining and the Yili Valley. The other is in the south, around Kashgar and Hetian. The more religiously oriented groups tend to gather around the second pole. Despite their loose convergence, however, "Groups like the 'Party of Allah' or 'Islamic Uigher Party' keep appearing and disappearing, but seem loosely connected and small in

membership. They advocate the establishment of an Islamic state and reject Chinese domination, but none of them has claimed to be part of a pan-Islamic network."[17] Moreover, even among the more permanent and organized groups, there seems to be a lack of incentive to cooperate. The ETIM and the ETLO, for example, display differences in "ideology, strategy and practice."[18] Thus, the separatist "movement" in Xinjiang materializes as highly fractionalized. But this is not the image Beijing has attempted to convey.

The PRC-SCIO document's treatment of Xinjiang's separatist organizations is more manipulative than it is systematic. It makes use of arbitrary and often confusing terms that rather abstract the situation:

> [T]he document in both its Chinese and English versions relies frequently on such vague generic terms as "the 'East Turkistan' terrorist organization," which it intersperses confusedly with references to specific groups, many of which also have "East Turkistan" in their names. Because in Chinese the compound "Dongtu" (East Turkistan) is used both in a generic sense, for all "East Turkistan" groups, and as a specific abbreviation for any name beginning with "East Turkistan," the result is ambiguity over whether a given act was committed by a specific group known to espouse a separatist line (such as the East Turkistan Liberation Organization, or ETLO) or by unknown perpetrators whom the authors of the document claim, without providing evidence, to be East Turkistan separatists. Moreover, the English version of the document uses the singular form ("the 'East Turkistan' terrorist organization") for terms that in Chinese (which lacks a definite article) are generic and possibly either singular or plural. The document thus implies that there is a unified East Turkistan terrorist organization of considerable strength. From all other indications, however, this is not the case.[19]

What is more striking than the document's inconsistency with current reality, however, is the lack of consistency it shares with Beijing's pre-9/11 position on Xinjiang. Herein lies the second major problem.

In a piece on Uygur separatist sentiments published just prior to the release of the PRC-SCIO's Xinjiang document,[20] Gardner Bovingdon gives the following description of the CCP's domestic line on Xinjiang: "It paints the opposition as vanishingly small in number, extreme and completely misguided in outlook, socially isolated, and doomed to fail in the immoral attempt to overthrow the dictatorship of the proletariat."[21] Such a depiction of anti-state elements has been typical of CCP propaganda since 1949 to present an image of complete party control over the Chinese state. But in reality, Beijing has been showing signs of growing concern over the Xinjiang separatist issue ever since Russia began retreating from the Central Asian

Republics (CARs) in the late 1980s. For example, China initiated the creation of the Shanghai Five in 1996 and has emphasized the need to prevent cross-border insurgency activities at every meeting held thereafter.[22] When Uzbekistan was added in June 2001 and the Five became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Beijing supported the creation of an anti-terrorist center in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.[23]

Granted, increasing diplomatic relations with the CARs is partially a result of Beijing's efforts to fill part of the political vacuum left after the Soviet Union's collapse. However, reports of escalating violence from top Xinjiang officials in the late 1990s indicate that Beijing's efforts were also intended to recruit support in containing the Uygur. For example, in March 1999, XUAR Governor Abdulahat Abdurixit claimed that during the 1990s, explosions, assassinations, and other violent incidents in Xinjiang numbered in the thousands. He further claimed that some 480 people had died from serious incidents in 1998 and 1999 alone. Available data tends to suggest that there was actually a significant decline in violence after 1997. Even the PRC-SCIO document acknowledges less violence, claiming only 162 deaths and 440 injuries as a result of terrorist acts for the entire decade.[24] Thus, it is likely that the governor's account was somewhat exaggerated.

Interestingly, it appears that prior to 2001, Chinese officials would also soften the official line on Xinjiang when it was in their interest to do so:

> Concerned perhaps about the region's image and negative impacts on potential foreign investment, officials moderated their statements in the early 2000s. In welcoming Chinese and international trade partners to the Urmuqi trade fair on September 2, 2001, Xinjiang Party Secretary Wang Lequan together with Abdulahat Abdurishit proclaimed that the situation in Xinjiang was "better than ever in history." While mentioning separatism, they stressed that "society is stable and people are living and working in peace and contentment."[25]

Such reassurances of stability, issued less than five months before the PRC-SCIO document, underscores the fact that Beijing's telling of the story in Xinjiang has, to date, been replete with inconsistencies. Most notably, while the extent of violence prior to the 2002 report may have been exaggerated or softened by Beijing to conform to changing political priorities, there was never any serious effort made to blame Xinjiang violence on an omnipresent unified Islamist movement before 9/11.

The second major problem relates to what the document does not report. The most violent event of the 1990s occurred in Baren, a small southern town near Kashgar. The facts are not entirely clear, but the following infor-

mation provided by the East Turkmenistan Information Center of Munich has been given precedence by Amnesty International over PRC claims. An armed uprising of some 3,000 Uygurs took control of the town, including the police station, on 5 April 1990. Their stated goal was to create an independent East Turkestan Republic. Twenty-four hours later, nine other local towns had joined the movement. The Chinese government sent in the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA), including 200,000 anti-riot troops, from Landzuo. Using tanks and fighter jets, the PLA bombed nine townships, killing, according to unofficial reports, 1,000 Uygurs and 600 police/soldiers. The movement did not appear to have used Islam as a rallying cry or motive. Amnesty International has classified Baren as a massacre.[26]

The description of the Baren incident in the PRC-SCIO document is limited to the following paragraph:

> On April 5, 1990, a group of terrorists, aided and abetted by the 'East Turkestan Islamic Party,' created a grave terrorist incident in Barin Township, Atko County, Xinjiang. They brazenly preached a 'holy war,' the 'elimination of pagans' and the setting up of an 'East Turkestan Republic.' The terrorists tried to put pressure on the government by taking ten persons hostage, demolished two cars at a traffic junction and killed six policemen. They shot at the besieged government functionaries with submachine guns and pistols, and threw explosives and hand-grenades at them.[27]

Such a subdued assessment is hardly surprising. First, the PLA did most of the killing. Second, the idea that violence in Xinjiang has somehow become a more pressing issue after 9/11 is not well supported by the fact that the region's most violent episode occurred in 1990 by non-Islamists.

The third major problem is the timing of the report's release, coupled with its content, which suggests that it was likely designed to realize two related goals. First, stressing a common interest in combating terrorism allowed Beijing to put its diplomatic relationship with Washington on a better footing. Prior to 9/11, the Bush regime had earmarked China as a "strategic competitor." Relations between the two were beset by an array of controversial issues, including national missile defense, American weapons sales to Taiwan, the EP-3 spy plane collision, China's missile exports to Pakistan, and, underlying it all, continued criticism regarding China's violations of human rights and religious freedom. By pushing the anti-terrorism angle, Beijing managed to partially redirect China's position from "strategic competitor" to "partner in anti-terrorism," thus guiding Sino-American relations in a new direction.[28]

The second goal was to attract international (particularly American) sympathy for Beijing's policies toward Xinjiang and the Uygurs. Beijing has been at least partially successful in achieving this goal. In late 2002, the United States extended its endorsement of PRC claims by placing one of Xinjiang's separatist movements – the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) – on its list of international terrorist organizations.[29] Since that time, around twenty-five Uygurs suspected of terrorist activities have been detained at the United States' irregular prison camp in Guantanamo.[30] Recently, the Pentagon cleared fifteen of them of "enemy combatant' status. However, due to fears of persecution and possible execution if they are returned to China, the United States has refused Beijing's demand that the men be returned to China. In consideration of public opinion and not wanting to further upset diplomatic relations with China, the United States has refused to provide refuge for the men. As of 5 May 2006, after being rejected by over 100 other countries, five of the detained Uygurs have been granted temporary asylum in Albania. Lawyers and amnesty workers close to the case have suggested that the five, and others still being held at Guantanamo, could eventually end up in Canada.[31]

The United States has further collaborated with China to pressure Central Asian states to cooperate with the repatriation of Chinese Uygurs. In Paki-stan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, this has often involved weeding a few Uygurs from the ranks of hundreds of Taliban detainees.[32] Granted, at the Shanghai APEC summit in October 2001, President Bush made it clear that the United States did not approve of China's using the war on terrorism as an "excuse to persecute minorities."[33] Nevertheless, with the American military supporting bases in the CARs and the situation in neighboring Afghanistan precarious, the Uygur-Islam connection has been receiving unprecedented attention in universities, think tanks, and the international media.[34]

Worse yet, its decision to designate the ETIM as a terrorist organization has amplified the abstractions present in the PRC-SCIO document. For example, when the American embassy in Beijing announced the designation on 22 August 2002, it adopted much of the language used by the SCIO, accusing the ETIM of some 200 acts of terrorism resulting in 162 deaths and 440 injuries. The problem here is that the PRC-SCIO document says that these same figure represent the deaths and injuries cased by all acts of terrorism in Xinjiang during the 1990s.

Thus, Washington has, in effect, accepted Beijing's position that the ETIM is solely responsible for all violent acts during the 1990s, many of which the PRC itself ambiguously acknowledges were the work of the ETLO

or of groups left unnamed. This PRC has exploited this error further by proclaiming that the United States has designated the "East Turkistan movement" (which technically includes all groups espousing independence, Islamist or not, violent or not) as terrorist in nature. A disturbing side effect of such murky rhetoric is that the conventional wisdom emerging from press releases and think tanks is that the ETIM, a unified, Islamist, anti-American, and anti-Chinese organization, is directing the violence in Xinjiang.[35]

Finally, even if the PRC-SCIO document's figures of 162 deaths and 440 injuries are accepted as true, they pale in comparison with the violence that has resulted from other protracted insurgencies in neighboring countries. For example, the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka have been responsible for an estimated average of 1,500 deaths *per annum* in a civil war that has lasted for twenty years. Maoist insurgents in Nepal are believed to have caused some 600 fatalities in 2001 and 2002 alone.[36] Regardless of motivation, then, Uygur insurgents have been responsible for contained and isolated violence, rather than the kind of indiscriminate mass killings generally associated with a large organized terrorist movement. But what of the document's claim that separatist elements in Xinjiang have connections to Osama bin Laden? Would not the existence of such a connection heighten the chances of escalating violence in the future?

The Bin Laden Connection?

The evidence that can be used to connect separatists in Xinjiang to Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, or the Taliban is tenuous at best. Beijing has claimed that the ETIM has had contact with both al-Qaeda and the Taliban, including a meeting with Bin Laden, receipt of al-Qaeda funds, and training of Uygurs in Taliban and al-Qaeda camps.[37] As for links with al-Qaeda, ETIM leader Hasan Mahsum "strongly denied any connection with or financial help from al-Qaeda."[38] Of course, perhaps Mahsum, not wanting to encourage warmer Sino-American relations, may have lied. Indeed, Islamabad announced in December 2003 that Pakistani forces had killed Mahsum that October during a raid on an al-Qaeda hideout in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area. However, according to Kakharman Khozhamberdi, head of the Uygurstan People's Party, there is suspicion in Xinjiang that Mahsum might in fact be a Chinese agent.[39] It is clear, then, that contradictory evidence on this matter abounds. Moreover, none of these accounts, to the best of my knowledge, have been effectively substantiated.

Also unsubstantiated are claims that the Taliban have provided aid to Uygur separatist groups. The short Sino-Afghan border at the Wakhan cor-

ridor mountain pass is controlled by the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, so there is little likelihood of contact being made there. Also, the Uygurs are ethnically akin to the Uzbeks and, as such, most have a greater affinity with the ethnic Uzbeks living in Afghanistan than with the Pashtuns, who make up the bulk of the Taliban. As for the few Uygurs involved with the Taliban: "Interviews conducted with Uighurs enrolled in the Taliban forces and captured by the Northern Alliance (published in *Le Monde* on September 30, 2001) indicated that they came on an individual basis to participate in the pro-Taliban jihad after a stay in Pakistan's Islamic schools. There was no suggestion that they sought to establish international networks."[40]

Beyond the lack of any clear collaboration, there is little reason to believe that the greater Uygur population in the region would have any motivation to attach itself to a unifying fundamentalist variant of Islam. To begin with, they are divided in their Islamic affiliations into competing Sufi and non-Sufi factions.[41] The Sufis themselves are predominantly Naqshbandiya, but are subdivided into the Jahriyya (meaning those who recite the *dhikr* [remembrance of Allah] loudly) and the Khufya (those who recite the *dhikr* quietly). Historically, these two branches have been bitter rivals.[42] To complicate this mix of religious divisions further, there are territorial loyalties, linguistic discrepancies, commoner-elite alienation, and competing political factions. This evidence of Uygur disunity can be seen in the May 1996 attack on the imam of Kashgar's Idgah mosque by rival Uygurs and the assassination of six Uygur officials in September 2002.[43]

Moreover, apart from violent fringe groups, the majority of Uygurs embrace a moderate popular Islamic culture. This is partially because Beijing controls the training and selection of Islamic leaders in China. Moreover, the Uygur middle class is, for the most part, professionally oriented and secular, and enjoys its adherence to Islamic beliefs and practices in a private manner that tends not to have overt political significance. Finally, as the CCP thoroughly monitors education in China, there has been little opportunity to develop religious schools that might incorporate the fundamentalist teachings of the Afghani or Pakistani *madarsi*.[44] All of this indicates that such fundamentalist groups as the Taliban and al-Qaeda, both of which are often glossed as "Wahhabiyya" in the region, would have limited appeal to the Uygurs.[45] Furthermore, it serves to undermine Beijing's claims that a sustained Islamist independence movement exists. What does exist "is a deep sense of alienation and extensive criticism by Uygurs of official Chinese policy towards Xinjiang on political, economic, social and cultural matters."[46]

Uygur Separatism: An Ethno-nationalist Response to Han-Chinese Domination

Interestingly, although the Uygurs share a general historic experience as Turkic-speaking people dwelling around the oases of what is now present-day Xinjiang, they did not begin to think of themselves as a single national identity until Moscow and Beijing identified them as such during the early part of the twentieth century.[47] While the infant Chinese Republic may have held legal title to the region after 1911, the continuous struggle between the KMT the CCP and various warlords allowed the Uygur a kind of default independence until mid-century. In fact, a formally proclaimed East Turkestan Republic existed in the region between 1944-49, and was then crushed by the newly formed PRC.[48] At first, living under the PRC was not so bad. PLA cadres were ordered to respect the Uygurs to distinguish themselves from the KMT. As such, an effort made to honor their customs and religious beliefs, learn their language, and acknowledge them as equals. However, respect for minority people and customs diminished rapidly as leftist political initiatives from the center gave way to the violence of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s-70s.[49] Furthermore, with Russia retreating from the CARs in the late 1980s, the Uygurs faced an enviable example in their Turkic cousins "who had not only gained independence but, in an astonishing feat of bureaucratic *legerdemain*, had become a part of Europe – as members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation."[50]

When the Uygurs became citizens of China, they also became officially recognized by the PRC as an ethnic minority of China (*zhonghua minzu*), one of fifty-six. This classification comes as part of a CCP nationalist propaganda policy, within which "the various *minzu* were all born into China's 'great family of *minzu*' and therefore fulfill their destinies by living within it."[51] The CCP has successfully nationalized many of the country's minority groups, particularly those who share strong cultural affinities with the majority Han.[52] However, as the Uygurs are ethnically, linguistically, religiously, culturally, and historically distinct, attempts to incorporate them into a greater Chinese identity have failed. Similarly, designating Xinjiang an "autonomous region" does little to placate the Uygur, since Han Chinese hold almost all significant political positions in the region. Furthermore, due to the CCP's Han resettlement policy, the region's Han population rose from roughly 200,000 in the mid-1940s to some 6.5 million in 1995 – a number that represents around 40 percent of the region's total population.[53]

The Uygurs have come to see themselves as one nation dominated by another. Their homeland is run and increasingly populated by Han Chinese,

who tend to enjoy better jobs and benefit from a contrived cultural dominance. In such an environment, calls for independence arise for various reasons, including those related to religion. However, the strongest and most widespread roots of separatist sentiment are related to the "rejection of the assimilationist formula of the *zhonghua minzu*, repudiation of the CCP's claims that all *minzu* enjoy political and economic equality, and critiques of the system of autonomy in Xinjiang."[54]

As far as *minzu* unity is concerned, the reality is that deep-rooted prejudices and uncomfortable inter-relations exist between the Uygurs and the Han. For example, in a 2000 survey conducted in both Han and Uygur households on ethnic relations in Xinjiang, Yee and associates found that 36.4% of Uygurs and 28% of Han feel their ethnic group to be "cleverer" than the other. Similarly, 43.6% of Uygur respondents and 31.7% of Han respondents believe their people to be more hygienic. Finally, when asked about the relative welfare of Uygur-Han relations, 42.5% of Uygur and 66.9% of Han felt them to be only fair or poor.[55] Social interaction between the two groups is generally restricted to the work place, and intermarriage is rare.[56]

These numbers would likely be augmented had a majority of interviewees felt comfortable, or even safe, responding to such sensitive questions in the presence of near-strangers. As one Uygur student said to Bovingdon during the latter's research in Xinjiang between 1994-97:

> If you announce you want to do research, they'd send people to follow you everywhere. And after you'd visited people, if you wrote things down, they'd find them, and they'd interrogate people. If it turned out they had said anything wrong, they could end up in jail. One word can get you three years in jail – did you know that?[57]

As such, Yee suspects that "Given the sensitivity of the question and the inclination to give desirable answers … ethnic prejudices between the Uygurs and Hans are more serious than our data suggest."[58]

When, in moments of emotion or recklessness, Uygurs do express their sentiments about *minzu* unity and separatism in public, the results can be highly revealing. Bovingdon witnessed a rare incident involving a Uygur woman (Rehile) and a Han woman (Wang), in which a debate over China's ownership of Xinjiang arose. The discussion is too lengthy to transcribe in full here, but a few experts give the general idea:

> Rehile had warmed to her theme, addressing me in Uygur. "Xinjiang was ours to begin with … my father and others his age were very hospitable. They welcomed people, though to tell you the truth, they looked down on

> Hans." She then repeated this phrase in Chinese, for Wang's benefit, and continued in that tongue: "Originally, it was ours. Then you people came and stole our place." … Wang leaned over to me and asked, "Have you heard of Wang Zhen and his pacification of Xinjiang? … If he hadn't brought it under control, people would have dared do any old thing. It would still be feudal, right? If he hadn't controlled it, then China wouldn't be unified, right?" These questions seemed to provoke Rehile all the more. She shot back, "Xinjiang is our place. It's not yours … Look at the Qazaqs and the Tajiks. After the Soviet Union split up, each group had its own country. If [China] splits up, Xinjiang will be an independent country." She said she had learned that very day that a gang of Han toughs had raped a young Uygur woman. Why, she wanted to know, couldn't Han men rape their own kind? Wang again sought common ground: "Hans and Uygurs are all one family." Rehile, indignant, contradicted her: "No, they're not. Hans are Hans. Uygurs are Uygurs. … Originally I didn't hate any *minzu* … But after seeing that girl … I began to hate. Now I hate them."[59]

Although this conversation represents only one person's direct opinion, that opinion can be extended in degrees to the Uygur population at large. The Uygur do not see themselves as being part of China or as akin to the Han. As the proprietor of the Verdant Camelthorn restaurant once expressed, much to the amusement of his clientele, "The camelthorn (a desert plant) is the Uygurs … and the desert is the Hans."[60]

Regarding economic considerations, it should be noted that the CCP's presence has not been without benefit for the Uygurs. The Great Western Development Strategy, which involves transfer payments to underdeveloped inland provinces from the booming coast, has been kind to Xinjiang. Between 1978-2002, the annual per capita income was multiplied by 15.68 in rural areas and by 23.37 in urban areas.[61] However, studies conducted by Bovingdon, Mackerras, and Yee all indicate that Uygurs do not feel that they are receiving their fair share of modernization's benefits.[62] One area where Han-Uygur differentials are the strongest felt is in cotton, a crop that is traditional to both Uygur and Han societies.

Uygurs see the cotton industry as a mechanism for Han immigration, giving advantage to the Han and the state over the Uygurs. As one cotton-grower told Mackerras:

> He was expecting to make nearly 40,000 yuan in 2003 for his cotton, or over twenty times the average 2002 rural income. Although he expressed satisfaction at his income, he also said that the cotton industry was bad for Han-Uygur relations, because the Han had better access to the investment and land necessary for cotton growing.[63]

Yee's 2000 survey shows similar results, with some 38 percent of Uygur respondents (as opposed to only 12.5 percent of Han respondents) saying they felt Uygur standards of living were rising slower than Han standards.[64] The nationalist sentiment that has developed among the Uygur is poignantly put by one of their best-known intellectuals, Abduqadir Jalalidin, who wrote: "If I construct a hell of my own devising, no matter how terrifying the flames, I will call it heaven. But a heaven built by others will cause my trees to wither."[65]

Finally, Han-Uygur political equality and Uygur autonomy are practically non-existent. To be fair, the Uygur are well represented in local government, the Xinjiang People's Congress having a minority base of 65.5 percent in 1998.[66] However, local People's Congresses in China have relatively little power compared to the various provincial bodies of the CCP, and here the Uygurs are greatly underrepresented. Virtually every party organ in the region from the county level up is headed by a Han, and at every level the party head outranks the corresponding government official.[67] Much of the problem here is that CCP members are expected to abandon their religious beliefs in favor of Marxist-Leninism, which poses a significant problem for many Uygurs. Those who do join are often branded as traitors by the rest of the Uygur community. However, even those Uygurs who do join do not tend to be promoted to significant positions. Many of the Uygur cadres interviewed by Yee in his 2000 survey were dissatisfied with the system to the point of seeking early retirement.[68] This problem has worsened due to the fact that a significant minority of the Uygurs, some 40 percent, do not view Han cadres as honest, industrious, or capable.[69]

Conclusion

The Uygurs are a predominantly Islamic people living in a sea of atheists with a strong taste for pork. The CCP does not currently allow them any freedom of religion or expression that conflicts with the party line, a fact of life that is not likely to change in the near future. Nor is it likely that that Xinjiang will become independent any time soon. Such conditions have led segments of the Uygur population to develop violent Islamist agendas. However, Beijing's calls to the international community for support in its fight with Islamist terrorism in Xinjiang should be taken with a fist of salt. There is little unity in Xinjiang's separatist movement, let alone unity under a brand of Islam that is alien to the region. Beijing's attempts to establish a connection between the Uygurs and al-Qaeda and the Taliban is based on precious little. And what purpose does making such a connection have when the worst vio-

lence in the region occurred over a decade ago? Washington has allowed Beijing to play its hand on Xinjiang, and this is very unfortunate for the Uygur people.

Xinjiang will not be a Tibet or an East Timor. It is not populated by friendly Buddhists suffering under a repressive foreign regime. It is populated by radical Islamists ... at least that is the current history being written by Beijing and, to a lesser extent, Washington. History has played a trick on the Uygurs. If they had suffered Stalin instead of Mao, it is possible that they would be independent today. And, independence would take the form of a nation of ethnic Turkic people in a land they view as theirs. Although likely a factor, religion does not appear to be a major motivation for separation. Rather, most Uygurs want back what has been taken from them: their home and their equality.

Endnotes

1. These are Mongolia, Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.
2. Note that *region* in this work is specific to the XUAR, and not ito any region adjacent to China (i.e., Central Asia).
3. World Tibet Network News, "China: Where Beijing Fears Kosovo," *World Tibet Network News*, 6 September 2000. Online at www.tibet.ca/en/wtn-archive/2000/9/6_1.html.
4. E. Labott, S. Grant, and T. Duffy, "US Urges China to Rethink Taiwan Law," CNN.com International, 9 March 2005. Online at http://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/asiapcf/03/07/china.npc.law/.
5. Explaining Xinjiang's incorporation is, unfortunately, beyond the purview of this work. An extensive discussion can be found in Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: The Story of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997). For a more parsimonious discussion, see Charles Horner, "The Other Orientalism: China's Islamist Problem," *The National Interest* (spring 2002): 37-45.
6. James D. Seymour, "Human Rights, Repression, and 'Stability,'" *Current History* (September 1999): 285.
7. World Tibet Network News, "China," 2.
8. Marika Vicziany, "State Responses to Islamic Terrorism in Western China and Their Impact on South Asia," *Contemporary South Asia* 12, no. 2 (June 2003): 247.
9. Human Rights Watch, "China: Human Rights Concerns in Xinjiang: A Human Rights Watch Backgrounder." Online at www.hrw.org/backgrounder/asia/China-bck1017.pdf.
10. Ibid., 6.

11. Ibid., 7.
12. James Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment," East-West Policy Studies, no. 6 (2004): 15. Online at www.eastwestcenter.org/stored/pdfs/PS006.pdf.
13. Ibid., 11.
14. Quoted in the *South China Morning Post*, 22 January 2002. Borrowed from Horner, "The Other Orientalism, 45.
15. Note here that this list is in no particular order of size or relevance.
16. Human Rights Watch, "China: Human Rights Concerns in Xinjiang," 2; Dewardric L. McNeal, "China's Relations with Central Asian States and Problems with Terrorism," Congressional Research Report for Congress, 8-9. Online at http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/7945.pdf.; Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," 13-14; Vicziany, "State Responses to Islamic Terrorism," 255.
17. Human Rights Watch, "China: Human Rights Concerns in Xinjiang," 2.
18. Vicziany, "State Responses to Islamic Terrorism," 255.
19. Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," 13.
20. And, therefore, most likely completed prior to 9/11.
21. Gardner Bovingdon, "The Not-So-Silent Majority: Uygur Resistance to Han Rule in Xinjiang," *Modern China* 28, no. 1 (January 2002): 47.
22. The Shanghai Five was an informal association of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia.
23. Human Rights Watch, "China: Human Rights Concerns in Xinjiang," 1.
24. Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," 12.
25. Ibid., 11.
26. Viczianzy, "State Responses to Islamic Terrorism," 249.
27. State Council, "East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get away with Impunity" (Beijing: Information Office, State Council, 2002). Borrowed from ibid., 248-49.
28. McNeal, "China's Relations with Central Asian States," 4. Online at http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/7945.pdf.
29. Vicziany, "State Responses to Islamic Terrorism," 244.
30. Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," 1.
31. See Glen McGregor, "Canada May Welcome Detainees." NationalPost.com, 14 June 2006. Online at www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=871c1410-b839-4dff-ae9a-d30f99095876&k=83624; Bruce Konviser, "A Strange Kind of Freedom." TheStar.com, 13 June 2006. Online at www.thestar.com/NASApp/cs/ContentServer?pagename=thestar/Layout/Article_Type1&c=Article&cid=1150149009716&call_pageid=968332188854&col=968350060724; Robin Wright, "Chinese Detainees are Men Without a Country." WashingtonPost.com, 24 August 2005. Online at www.thestar.com/NASApp/cs/ContentServer?pagename=thestar/Layout/Article_Type1&c=Article&cid=1150149009716&call_pageid=968332188854&col=968350060724.

32. Dru C. Gladney, "Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism," *The China Quarterly* 174 (June 2003): 457.
33. Mike Allen and Philip P. Pan, "China Vows To Help in Terror Fight," *The Washington Post*, 19 October 2001. Borrowed from McNeal, "China's Relations with Central Asian States," 5.
34. Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," 10.
35. Ibid., 11-14.
36. Vicziany, "State Responses to Islamic Terrorism," 244-45.
37. Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," 23.
38. Colin Mackerras, "Ethnicity in China: The Case of Xinjiang," *Harvard Asia Quarterly* (winter 2004): 14. Online at www.fas.harvard.edu/~asiactr/haq/200401/0401a001.html.
39. Millward, "Violent Separatism in Xinjiang," 24.
40. Human Rights Watch, "China: Human Rights Concerns in Xinjiang," 3.
41. Gladney, "Islam in China," 6.
42. R. Israeli and A. Gardner-Rush, "Sectarian Islam and Sino-Muslim Identity in China," *The Muslim World* 90, no. 3 (fall 2000): 436.
43. Gladney, "Islam in China," 6.
44. Vicziany, "State Responses to Islamic Terrorism," 253.
45. Gladney, "Islam in China," 457.
46. Vicziany, "State Responses to Islamic Terrorism," 253.
47. Indeed, "Foreigner travel accounts of Xinjiang from the mid-16th century to the early 20th century contain no references to any collective group referred to as Uygur, but instead found people identifying themselves as *Turki* (from their language family), *Sart* (meaning "caravaneer" in old Persian), and such oasis-based ethnonyms as *Kashgarlik*, *Turpanlik*, and *Kotanlik*. (Dru C. Gladney, "Constructing a Contemporary Uighur National Identity: Transnationalism, Islamization, and State Representation," 1. Online at www.ceni-sciences-po.org/public/cemoti/texts13/gladney.pdf.)
48. Horner, "The Other Orientalism," 42.
49. Bovingdon, "The Not-So-Silent Majority," 45.
50. Horner, "The Other Orientalism," 43.
51. Ibid., 41.
52. For an interesting discussion of this phenomenon, see Jonathan Unger, "Not Quite Han: The Ethnic Minorities of China's Southwest." Online at www.rspas.anu.edu.au/papers/ccc/JU-not-quite.Han.pdf. For an interesting discussion more specific to the creation of Muslim minority nationality in China, see Dru C. Gladney, *Ethnic Identity in China: The Making of a Muslim Minority Nationalism* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998).
53. Bovingdon, "The Not-So-Silent Majority," 45.
54. Ibid., 46.
55. Herbert S. Yee, "Ethnic Relations in Xinjiang: A Survey of Uygur-Han Relations in Urmuqi," *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 26 (August 2003) 439-42.

56. Ibid., 449.
57. Bovingdon, "The Not-So-Silent Majority," 48.
58. Yee, "Ethnic Relations in Xinjiang," 440.
59. Bovingdon, "The Not-So-Silent Majority," 50-51.
60. Ibid., 52.
61. Mackerras, "Ethnicity in China," 5.
62. Mackerras, "Ethnicity in China," 2004; Yee, "Ethnic Relations in Xinjiang"; Bovingdon, "The Not-So-Silent Majority."
63. Mackerras, "Ethnicity in China," 6.
64. Yee, "Ethnic Relations in Xinjiang," 443.
65. Abduqadir Jalalidin, "An Artistic Rendering of Historical Perception," *Sinjang Madaniyiti* 224 (1997): 49. Borrowed from: Bovingdon, "The Not-So-Silent Majority," 55.
66. Mackerras, "Ethnicity in China," 8.
67. Bovingdon, "The Not-So-Silent Majority," 57.
68. Yee, "Ethnic Relations in Xinjiang," 449.
69. Ibid., 441.