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An Exploration of China's Most Controversial Ethnic Minority: the Uyghurs

China has five officially recognized religions, including Buddhism, Taoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam. Less than one percent of Chinese practice Islam, and of those, the two largest Muslim ethnic groups are the Hui and the Uyghurs. Uyghurs are a Turkic ethnic group located primarily in southwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, although a smaller population exists in south-central Hunan as well. While they are one of 55 officially recognized minority groups in China, their relationship with the Chinese government has never been without conflict. Since 1996, Xinjiang has been under strict police and military occupation to combat extremism, separatism, and terrorism. Militant action has been taken in conjunction with economic incentives, as it is believed that poverty is closely tied with the rise of terrorism. Despite rapid economic growth and infrastructural development, tension in the region remains high, and many argue that the actions taken by the central government have violated the human rights of Uyghur minorities. Essentially, continued conflict in the region can be explained by three major problems: a disconnect between policy and implementation, racism, and a top-down approach to economic reform that alienates the population.

To begin, the Chinese government utilizes a "one eye open and one eye closed" form of religious governance, where violations of formal regulations are tolerated as long as people pretend that they are following the rules (Weller 135). However, the same does not go for Tibet or the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. After the fall of the Qing dynasty, Xinjiang surrendered to the Communist Party in 1949, which sought out the region's natural resources and oil reserves. Then, in 1957 the Anti-Rightist Movement imposed strict bans on local ethnic

nationalism and religion, which was followed by intense persecution during the Cultural Revolution. During the reform and opening-up period, the "one eye open and one eye closed" method of governance began, meaning restrictions on minorities and religion loosened. As a result of this, many minorities felt bold enough to begin speaking out against what they saw as years of discriminatory economic, religious, and political practices. The most notable event was an armed Uyghur uprising in Baren Township in April of 1990 (Davis 17). The Chinese government saw this as a serious threat to stability and began its first "Strike Hard" campaign in 1996, which targeted illegal religious activity in Xinjiang that threatened public order. However, after September, 11, 2001, the Chinese government feared that separatists and terror networks, such as al-Qaeda, had been training Uyghurs in Afghanistan for activities in Xinjiang (Davis 18). Thus, a strong police and military presence has remained in Xinjiang ever since to combat what President Hu called "the three evils of extremism, separatism, and terrorism" (People's Daily).

While the central Chinese government's militant actions would lead one to believe most Uyghurs want a separate Islamic state, such a consensus does not exist among Uyghurs themselves. It is impossible to pinpoint any official agenda due to internal fragmentation. Although, there is little evidence to support the claims that Uyghurs were being trained in Afghanistan, some do indeed want a separate state; others want to remain an autonomous region within China, and others want to integrate into China (Davis 15). Given these internal divisions among Uyghurs, one is left to question whether the Chinese government's hardline approach has actually improved political relations, or served to further radicalize members of the population. American scholar Elizabeth Van Wie Davis points out, "The heavy-handedness of the multiple 'strike hard' campaigns by the central Chinese government in Xinjiang tamps down violence in

the short run, but it fuels a sense of injustice and mistrust among the Uyghurs in the long run" (Davis 16).

Statements from central government leadership and official policy suggests that they understand this, but there is a disconnect between the leadership's official stance and the actions taken by military personnel on the ground. In 1999, the Office of the State Council passed the National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China, which outlines an impressively equitable plan for cooperation with national minorities while preserving their cultural and political autonomy (Information Office of the State Council). In 2006, then director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, Ye Xiaowen even stated:

> As Chinese Muslims advance with the nation, this is our response to the many turbid misunderstandings that tarnish the Muslim image: Islam is a peace-loving religion. Chinese Muslims love peace, oppose turmoil and separatism, advocate tolerance and harmony, and treasure unity and stability. (Davis 18)

Yet police armed with assault rifles are constantly patrolling the streets in Xinjiang. During an interview with American tourist Neil Yeung about his time in Kashgar in June of 2010, he recalled that if two or more Uyghur men stood next to each other, police would break them up and spit insults. It is undeniable that Uyghurs are treated as second class citizens,

Yeung, Neil. "Streets of Kashgar." June 2010.

causing Western human rights groups to express concern that the Chinese government is merely using the threat of terrorism as an excuse to abuse Uyghur minorities (Davis 18). The question then arises as to why such a drastic disconnect between policy and implementation exists.

To explore this issue further, a critical analysis of race is necessary. This requires one to turn to the largest Muslim minority in China, the Hui, who have had a significant impact on perception of Uyghurs. The Hui originated from a central Asian Muslim ethnic group known as the Dungans and look similar in appearance to Han Chinese. As a means of survival, the Hui have had to adapt to Chinese society, often downplaying the political emphasis of traditional Islam in order to accommodate two identities (Frankel 421). To continue to be accepted by Han Chinese in a world that increasingly demonizes Islam, Hui Muslims have identified a common enemy from which they can distinguish themselves. In an article from the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs,* James D. Frankel notes:

> When we have heard of foreign fighters in Afghanistan coming from China, or being detained at Guantanamo Bay, they are invariably of [Uyghur] ethnicity. The ethnic-Chinese Hui constantly try to distinguish themselves from these Turkic-speaking Muslims, whom they see as unruly, and un-Chinese. On this, Hui Muslims and non-Muslim Han Chinese tend to agree. (Frankel 431)

First of all, the 20 Uyghurs imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay were never charged with any offense and most have since been resettled (BBC). Yet the Hui actively encourage this perception of Uyghurs as the "un-Chinese" Muslims because it allows them to be seen as the "proper" Chinese Muslims. Even though a large number of Uyghurs do not subscribe to a violent interpretation of Islam, they are pushed into this generalization by China's official media. In March of 2014 after a violent Uyghur uprising, the People's Daily official Weibo account published a letter from

Uyghur students that condemned the violence, blaming it on terrorists "hijacking the entire Uyghur nation" (Chunshan). Clearly, the language of this letter perfectly reflects the government's stance, while having it come from Uyghur students conveniently instills a desire for unity. However, the fact that this letter was not written in Uyghur and that the comments have been heavily censored lead some to question whether it was really written by Uyghur students in the first place. Nonetheless, many Chinese citizens accept this common perception of Uyghurs as "the other," and this attitude is greatly reinforced by differences in language and appearance. Uyghurs do not look like Han Chinese, and they speak their own Turkic language, which makes mingling between Uyghurs and Han even more difficult. Understanding this distinction between the Hui and the Uyghurs is key in beginning to understanding why Han police officers and soldiers are comfortable taking such brutal measures in Xinjiang. All evidence suggests that they believe they are taking action against militant terrorists, not regular non political people.

Yeung, Neil. "Back to School." June 2010.

Yeung, Neil. "Jamming." June 2010.

In addition to the deliberate differentiation placed between Uyghurs and the Hui, it is important to look at the Han settlers, whose mass migration into Xinjiang has made Uyghurs a minority within their own autonomous region. Anthropologist Tom Cliff goes in depth in the first ever ethnographic study of Han settlers in Xinjiang. He notes that Han in Xinjiang have an unspoken dependency on the core region of China, and that "[t]he metacontext of Han experience in Xinjiang is their role as agents and objects of a colonial endeavor on a cultural and political periphery" (Cliff 209). The idea of Xinjiang as a political periphery to be conquered roots back to the Manchu Qing empire's ideology and has carried over into the CCP's thinking. Chinese and Inner Asian History professor at Harvard University, Mark Elliott, summed this up quite directly when he said, "China still thinks like an empire" (qtd. in Cliff 209). This is important when discussing race relations because if people from the mainland view peripheral nations like Xinjiang and Tibet as areas to be conquered, it inevitably means they view the people in those regions as backwards and in need of modernization.

From this point, one can begin to piece together why rapid economic growth and infrastructural development has failed to ease tensions in the area. The main reason is that economic growth has not been a cooperative process from the bottom up, but rather a process controlled completely by the Party from the top down. Uyghurs also complain that Han are taking their jobs (BBC). Overall, a situation has arised in which old infrastructure is replaced by what the Party and economists objectively view as an improvement, but they fail to consider the cultural significance of those places and leave members of the community completely alienated from the process. For example, the Chinese government boasts about their investments in industrial and energy projects, but Uyghurs complain that this is at the expense of their farmland, which is being confiscated for redevelopment (BBC). Beijing has also sent representatives to

Xinjiang to teach farms how to improve their practices, which has insulted Uyghurs' pride (Yeung). This, alongside aggressive military occupation and an increase in Han settlers, makes development in Xinjiang more akin to imperialism than aid no matter the original intention.

Yeung, Neil. "Old Town Kashgar." June 2010.

Yeung, Neil. "Imperialism with Chinese characteristics." June 2010.

In summary, economic and infrastructural development has failed to ease tensions in Xinjiang because aggressive military occupation undermines official policy; racist sentiments against Uyghurs are inflated by the Hui and internet rhetoric; and finally, the Party's top-down

take on economic reform alienates the population and disregards cultural sensitivities. In order for the Party to soothe ethnic tensions, all three of these issues must be addressed simultaneously. Otherwise, they will continue to exacerbate one another in a vicious cycle. Aggressive military occupation will result in more violent uprisings, violent uprisings will validate racist fear mongering, and top-down economic reform will further isolate Uyghurs from newfound industries controlled by Han settlers. These problems are not mutually exclusive, and until the central Chinese government recognizes this, distrust between Uyghurs and Han Chinese will continue to grow in severity.

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