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**Ethnic Strife on China's Western Frontier**

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# **Ethnic Strife on China's Western Frontier**

by

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**Report**

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# **Ethnic Strife on China's Western Frontier**

by

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Ethnic tension frequently causes unrest in Xinjiang, a province in northwestern China that shares international borders with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and India. The Uighurs a Turkic Muslim ethnic group of about 8 million who once made up the vast majority of Xinjiang, but now they only represent about half of Xinjiang's population due to mass migration of Han Chinese into the region. Uighur groups living outside of China claim that China suppresses the Uighurs' religious freedom and is diluting their culture in the region through its policies that encourage Chinese to move into the region. Beijing argues that Xinjiang has always been a part of China, despite its language and cultural differences, and that the Uighurs have benefitted from Chinese rule. The purpose of this report is to examine the source of the ethnic tensions through first-hand reporting in the region and interviews with expert sources, Chinese sources, and Uighurs sources both inside and outside of China. The final goal of this paper is to tell a balanced truth of the ethnic struggle between the Uighurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang.

## Table of Contents

China's 'New Territory' - The Center of Asia.....	1
Xinjiang's Tumultuous History.....	5
The Geopolitics of Xinjiang.....	8
Ethnic Strife in China.....	13
International Reaction to Unrest in Xinjiang.....	15
Modern Urumqi: A Cosmopolitan City.....	17
Oil Boom in China's Wild West.....	20
The Future of the Silk Road.....	22
References.....	25
Vita.....	28

## China's 'New Territory' - The Center of Asia

*China's Xinjiang province is an expansive, sparsely populated geographical diverse region crucial to China's national security and a source of ethnic conflict and instability.*

XINJIANG AUTONOMOUS REGION, CHINA — I awaken from a deep sleep to a panoramic landscape of desert plants poking out of rocky terrain. Sheep graze on a distant hillside, and every so often I see an oilrig interrupting the scenery. I briefly confuse my location with the vast stretches of West Texas I used to traverse as a child — until the train attendant rolls her cart down the aisle, calling out all of the breakfast refreshments she has in jarringly high-pitched Mandarin only employed in China when selling something. It is the summer of 2008 and as I hear a patriotic song celebrating the coming Olympics to be held in Beijing, I remember I'm not in Texas but in far west China.

I'm on the final stretch of a 48-hour train ride from Shanghai to Urumqi, the capital city of China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The word *xinjiang* translates to "new frontier" or "new border." Its name reflects Beijing's historical perspective on the region. Xinjiang has been a geopolitical flashpoint in Central Asia for the last 2,000 years. I've come to Xinjiang — a region that is more than 640,930 square miles, almost three times the size of Texas, and about 2,000 miles, or a five-hour flight, west of Beijing, the heart of Chinese power —to explore the old Silk Road and to learn more about the controversies swirling around the native Uighur people.

I first encountered the Uighurs when I was a college student in Beijing in the late 1990s. I was surprised to find an entire street behind my college in Beijing with dark skinned men wearing skull caps, selling lamb kabobs and flat bread while listening to Middle-Eastern music. The street could have been transplanted directly from Central Asia.

The Uighurs are a Turkic Muslim ethnic group of about 8 million who once made up the vast majority of Xinjiang, but now they only represent about half of Xinjiang's

population. In the capital city of Urumqi, the ratio is seven Han Chinese to three Uighurs because of Chinese government programs designed to encourage more Han to move to the region. The Uighur, with a history of fierce cultural independence, have lived under Chinese rule off and on for 1,000 years, but the nature of their relationship with the ethnic Han has changed extensively in the last 60 years since Beijing actively began encouraging settlers to move into the region.

Similar to its handling of Tibet, Beijing's strategy in dealing with Uighur unrest has been to come down forcefully while simultaneously launching major media campaigns to lay the blame of dissatisfaction on outside forces. In Tibet's case, China often places the blame on the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader who lives in exile in India. In the case of Xinjiang, Beijing blames Rebiya Kadeer, a 62-year-old Uighur businesswoman who has been living in Washington D.C. in exile since 2005. Kadeer is the face of the Germany-based World Uighur Congress, the largest international organization composed of Uighurs living outside of China. Somewhat of an icon in her community, human rights activists know her as the "Mother of the Uighurs."

The Uighurs, an ethnicity largely unknown to the West, made headlines in 2002 when U.S. forces detained several Uighurs in terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. They claimed they were not training to fight against the U.S. but instead were freedom fighters hoping to gain skills to fight against Beijing's control over Xinjiang. After several years of detention in Guantanamo Bay where Chinese agents were granted the right to integrate them, the U.S. Congress recently decided to send some of the detainees to Bermuda and others to the Pacific Island of Palau after trying unsuccessfully for years to find countries that would accept them.

Xinjiang is also home to ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Tajiks. Half the population in the region is Turkic Muslim. Many of those Muslims look toward Central Asia and the Middle East rather than China for spiritual and cultural guidance — which makes Beijing understandably wary.

As more Han Chinese move into Xinjiang to develop the region's sprawling oil, natural gas, iron ore, coal and agricultural resources, they build roads and military bases that are forcibly displacing Uighurs and other minorities. Chinese authorities have long suspected the Uighurs of separatist goals and links with Islamic extremists, and it seems

clear that Beijing has not figured out how to peacefully assimilate its large ethnic minorities in western China.

During my last few hours to Urumqi, the train crosses open deserts that dwarf those of Death Valley. The arid terrain resembles Luke Skywalker's barren home of Tatooine from the movie "Star Wars." To travel Xinjiang is to experience the desolate, liberating freedom of the Old American West and its untamed, rugged wilderness. This geography has played a crucial role in ensuring that a single group couldn't maintain a firm grip over the region until recent times.

Mountain ranges in the south and southwest distinctly separate Xinjiang from Tibet, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Mountains in the west and northwest provide a boundary between Xinjiang and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and much of the Kazakh-China border. Jagged sawtooth formations surge up from the rocky terrain. Grooved by ancient oceanic erosion, they leave a mesmerizing first impression.

In some ways, on the surface, it hardly seems like land worth fighting over, but Beijing has a lot at stake here. It must juggle its economic imperative to exploit Xinjiang's resources, its ability to quell unrest and its desire to soothe relationships with neighboring Muslim nations and even the United States. For some people in the region, the very survival of a long-lasting culture rests on the complex decisions made by Chinese leaders.

One thing is clear as I travel through this land: The divisions run deep and are even evident in uniquely personal ways.

On my second visit to Urumqi I stopped by a foreign-owned bar and Internet café called Fubar, *fu* means "lucky" in Chinese, so the bar's name can be loosely translated to "lucky bar." The bar itself was comfortably lit, with wide booths, couches, an expansive selection of foreign reading material left by travelers, a large flat screen TV with a satellite connection, and hookahs. Jazz and rock music play in the background while Chinese, Uighurs, Russians, Kazakhs and the occasional Australian, European or American bellied up to the bar, getting along but also occasionally eyeing one another suspiciously or getting a little rowdy. It was a microcosm of Xinjiang, a crossroads and meeting place where ideas and goods are traded, but not without its disputes.

I met a young, handsome Uighur man who recently graduated from a university in eastern China and had come back to Xinjiang. Full of passion and creativity, he spoke positively of finding a way to get along with the Chinese. He took me to visit his home, a high-rise apartment that overlooked the urban Urumqi skyline. He got out a bottle of local wine and a piece of the local flat bread or *nan*. He played me a hip-hop song he recorded in Uighur and told me how he met and had gone home with a "beautiful Han girl" only two nights before after having too much to drink at a local bar. His sincerity and youth were touching. He told me how the girl hadn't returned his calls since their initial meeting, and said he was depressed by what he called the impossibility of the two having a future together. She told him that even though she really liked him, there was too much in the way and her family wouldn't allow her to date, much less marry, a Uighur.

"We will never be free of China," he said. "They will continue to move here. They are already too strong." He was resigned to the future of Xinjiang within China, but determined to make the most of it.

"I just hope we can live together to make a better place," he said.

## **Xinjiang's Tumultuous History**

***The historical interpretation of Xinjiang's relationship to China is at the heart of the current conflicts between the Uighurs and Beijing.***

I've heard two different narratives about Uighur separatism.

The official government version provides justification for Chinese control of the region using a very selective interpretation of history while pointing to the elevated economic status the Chinese have brought to the minorities in the area. Beijing blames international intruders for riling up separatist movements in Xinjiang. From China's official point of view, Uighurs would never want to rebel because they are living under the peaceful umbrella of stability and prosperity bestowed upon them by the Han. According to Beijing, it could only be Islamic extremists from the outside who would stir things up.

Meanwhile, The World Uighur Congress and the Uighur American Association, the U.S.-based branch of the organization provide the narrative for the Uighur version of the conflict. Mehmet Tohti, a former vice president of the World Uighur Congress, said the Chinese fabricated the existence of a group of Uighurs known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which, allegedly, has sought to form a separate country of East Turkestan-- the name many Uighurs use to refer to Xinjiang. This separatist group is real, say the Chinese, and it is an organization that they have frequently blamed for terrorist attacks in Xinjiang. Subsequently, it has also been deemed a terrorist group by the United States and the United Nations. After the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the Bush administration put the group on the terrorist watch list, ostensibly as part of a deal with the Chinese to ensure their cooperation in the so-called global war on terror.

Amy Reger, a human rights researcher at the Washington D.C.-based Uighur American Association offered her group's official position on the alleged separatist organization. "Of course there is no connection between either the UAA or the WUC and ETIM," Reger said. "We think it either doesn't exist or it's a very small group of people, not a large organization, and we condemn the activities that are attributed to them."

But Tohti and others scoff at the notion that the East Turkestan Islamic Movement — or its alleged, latest manifestation, the Turkestan Islamic Party — even exists. They say that the Han Chinese are nothing short of colonizers and that the region should rightly be recognized as the nation of East Turkestan.

In many ways, the reality of the conflict is somewhere between these two opposing views. Xinjiang has prospered under Chinese rule and to some extent the Uighurs have benefited, but it is also true that Uighur culture, religion and even language have been threatened by China's policies. Most Uighurs I talked to in Xinjiang wanted to find a peaceful solution to living under Chinese control — only with more autonomy, religious freedom and economic parity between them and the ruling Han Chinese.

Any visit to the region reveals that a large economic disparity does exist between the Uighurs and Hans — and it is most evident in the cities.

"Beijing's policies to deal with its minority populations, particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet, have included transmigrating large populations of Han Chinese to the areas to dilute the local population," said Rodger Baker, a Senior East Asia analyst at Stratfor, a private geopolitical intelligence company based in Austin, Texas (In the interest of full disclosure the author began working at Stratfor in May, 2009 well after the initial interview with Baker). "These Han transmigrants are offered economic and other privileges as an incentive, and over time begin to dominate the local economies in the major cities, exacerbating the existing tensions between the ethnic groups."

He added: "Migrant Han play a disproportionate role in the Xinjiang economy, not only gaining preferential treatment for their businesses but also being the primary pool of labor for the profitable energy projects in the region. And while Beijing spends to develop infrastructure and modernize cities in Xinjiang, such modernization comes at a cost to the local historical culture and architecture and focuses spending on urban development, leaving the countryside — where the ethnic minorities remain the dominant population — even further behind in the socio-economic scale."

It is, in many ways, a recipe for unrest, Baker said. "This helps stir ethnic disparities and tensions, with the local Uighur population worried about cultural and economic imperialism by the Han and often perceiving themselves [as] second class citizens in their own traditional lands."

He and other observers say Chinese policies must be considered in a national context. China faces three major separatist threats: in Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. Xinjiang has only begun to garner national attention in the last few years, but in many ways tensions here are strategically more important to China than in Taiwan or Tibet because of its richness in natural resources and strategic proximity to Central Asia. The Chinese government's ability to manage social unrest and separatism is a gauge of its competence to run the nation.

If any of these regions cause a great enough stir, the Chinese government will appear unable to control social unrest, which historically has signified the beginning of the end for Chinese regimes.

In the minutiae of the region's day-to-day life, it is sometimes difficult to keep in mind the big sweeps of history and the enormous geopolitical stakes involved — but not impossible. Here in the wilderness, herdsmen, many of them just boys, watch their animals as they have for millennia. I can just as easily imagine haggard and dehydrated Chinese soldiers of ages past falling out of formation here, on the scorched, salt-covered earth, as they marched westward to assert Chinese imperial power over the region that would eventually serve as a buffer between Beijing and potential Middle Eastern and Central Asian invaders.

Outside of the cities, the only sign of civilization encountered are the abandoned work communes or People's Liberation Army outposts. Occasionally a desolate farming village may appear. In these frontier outposts residents sell hard Uighur *nan* and stringy mutton kebabs spiced with chili powder. Jam-packed mini-busses driven by Han drivers screech into these outposts to let the passengers out so they can relieve themselves behind a filthy outhouse — it's usually too foul to go inside. The driver will also jump out of the bus and order provisions in Mandarin. The Uighurs understand the basics of the language but are unlikely to engage in more small talk than necessary.

Chinese pop-music riffs from an electric guitar often pour out from the bus windows, and they contrast sharply with the ancient, acoustic Uighur music usually heard in the region.

It seems as if the differences — the cultural and political divisions — are as old and sturdy as the mountains themselves.

## **The Geopolitics of Xinjiang**

*Abundant in oil, gas, coal and iron ore and strategically positioned next to Central Asia's energy resources, the region plays a central role in China's economic development.*

Xinjiang borders Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and India. As tensions have mounted in those regions, Beijing has wondered whether conflict would spill into Xinjiang. The wariness has its roots in the long, evolving history of western China. "It has historically served as a buffer for Beijing for potential Asian and Russian invaders from the West," Baker said.

In the end, history is at the crux of all controversy in Xinjiang. But depending on whom you talk to, you'll find starkly different histories of the region. Some Uighur and some Han Chinese have revised their versions to serve their respective purposes.

Surrounded by invaders from the north, Chinese empires to the East, and Persian and Roman empires applying pressure from the West, Xinjiang's core has been assaulted multiple times over the centuries. The region has always been a conduit of cultural exchange, religion and goods between China and Europe, and the people who live there seem to understand that they are from a land that is both resilient and unbending. Today, the Uighurs seem to have only become more unified against China's attempts to assimilate the region.

The Chinese, of course, insist that they have a long history of controlling the region, dating back to the Han Dynasty from 202 B.C. through 265 A.D. But this is only a partial truth.

General Ban Chao was the first Chinese general to conquer Xinjiang in B.C. 94, but China would quickly lose control of the region. It wouldn't regain it again until the Tang Dynasty (618 – 906). Even during the Tang Dynasty, the region paid tribute to China but was never assimilated, retaining its own culture, language, religion and local government.

"Chinese insecurity about Xinjiang is based on a 200-year history of outside involvement and intervention in this frontier region," said James A. Millward, a China and Central Asia expert at Georgetown University, in a 2005 official report to Congress. "The Chinese view of the region's history stresses foreign interference above all else as the source of trouble in Xinjiang from the 18th century to the present."

From the ninth to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a dynasty of Uighur kings controlled the region, longer than any other power has before or since. The Uighurs of that time were not Muslims. Originating as nomads from the steppes of central Asia, they then converted to Manichaeism and then to Buddhism before being converted to Islam in the 1400s. China re-conquered Xinjiang in 1759, and by 1884 it was completely absorbed as a province. Aside from two brief exceptions when the Uighurs established a short-lived republic called East Turkestan that arose in 1931 to 1934 and then in 1944 to 1949, Xinjiang would never regain its independence

Though those separatist movements proved unsuccessful, it has been a constant challenge for Beijing to maintain its control over the region. In 1990, the Chinese official media reported a major counterrevolutionary riot in the southern part of the province near Kashgar that left 22 dead before it was suppressed. In February of 1997, a pro-independence uprising left as many as 100 dead. A group called the Organization for Turkestan Freedom in 1997 claimed responsibility for the bombing of a bus in Beijing that injured 30 people. More recently, Uighur riots and violence have broken out in Xinjiang and even in eastern China, including a June riot in a Guangdong factory between Uighur and Han migrant workers.

Beijing often claims the Germany-based World Uighur Congress and Kadeer are connected directly to the separatist East Turkestan Islamic Movement and also had a direct hand in the July uprising in Xinjiang — a claim that Kadeer and her organization vehemently challenge.

"We oppose all forms of violence," Kadeer said in a statement on her group's Web site. "The Uighur people's response to the continuing brutality of Chinese rule has been peaceful because the Uighur people do not want a future that is predicated on violence and bloodshed."

“However, UAA adds its voice to all those who accuse the Chinese government of using the perceived threat of terrorism to persecute the entire Uyghur people. Just because we oppose human rights abuses against us perpetrated by the Chinese authorities does not mean we are terrorists: It means we are human and in search of human rights and justice,” she added.

In addition to the World Uighur Congress, Kadeer is also president of the Uighur American Association, both of which receive funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, an organization founded to promote democracy around the world that is funded mostly by annual cash grants through an allocation by the U.S. Congress and subject to congressional oversight. In 2008, the endowment gave more than \$500,000 to Uighur organizations, according to its Web site.

Although Kadeer and the Dalai Lama appear to have similar goals, she is quick to admit that there are also many differences between her and the Tibetan leader. She is not a religious leader, and she has only received a fraction of the international attention the Dalai Lama has.

Kadeer once had a successful career as a department store owner in Urumqi. She had also once been appointed to China's national advisory group, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. She was even sent as a delegate to the United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995.

Despite her seemingly innocuous past, Kadeer was jailed in 1999 on charges of harming national security in China. She was reportedly on her way to meet a delegation from the U.S. Congressional Research service when she was picked up. She left for the United States shortly after she was released from prison in 2005, in part because of U.S. diplomatic pressure.

Meanwhile, the Uighur relationship with the U.S. has been, in its own way, also very complicated: The Bush administration, in cooperation with Beijing, placed the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement on the U.S.'s official terror watch list in 2002. Terrorism experts say that after its leader was killed in 2003, members reorganized into similar groups, including the Turkestan Islamic Party, and received training from al-Qaida in Pakistan's tribal area abutting Afghanistan.

While no one disputes that Uighur separatist groups have conducted clandestine

terrorist activities in Xinjiang and fought for independence, Dru Gladney, a Uighur expert at the Pacific Basin Institute at Pomona College, said no solid evidence points to the existence of organized separatist movements. "The characterization of the Guantanamo Uighurs as 'ETIM terrorists' is a misnomer at best and at worst a calculated mischaracterization of a group of people whom the Bush administration and the Department of Defense determined comprise no threat to the U.S.," Gladney testified to the U.S. Congress in June.

But Stratfor's Baker offered a different perspective that helps explain Chinese wariness of the Uighurs.

"There are elements of the Uighur separatist movement that are very closely linked to Central Asian Pakistan and Afghan militants, right down to links to Al Qaeda and links to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan," Baker said. "ETIM history goes back to the 1940s and '50s in various forms, sometimes based in Xinjiang. Currently, it appears the base of operations is in the Pakistani border area, moving closer to Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan."

Because of the group's small size, it's understandable that even most Uighurs had not heard of it. "As a force structure it's very minimal, a dozen or two dozen at its core," Baker added. "They act by trying to inspire others to carry out attacks rather than do it themselves, so the minor things we saw right around the Olympics were inspirationally derived rather than trained and assigned attacks. "

Baker and other observers add that, as always, economics are a primary driving force in the region, and — much like the Middle East being defined by oil — is defined by its natural resources. According to official Chinese data there are 730 million tons of iron ore reserves in the region — a treasure that is vital to the ever-growing Chinese industrial machine.

The government also estimates that 256 billion barrels of oil and 38 percent of China's coal are in the region. And as it has throughout its history, the region is still a vital corridor, but now for energy: Most of the energy that China imports from Central Asia comes through a pipeline connecting Xinjiang to Kazakhstan.

Chinese officials have also taken note of Xinjiang's potential to generate alternative form of energy. As in the American West, the barren, open landscape is

ideally situated for wind-generated power. The train to Urumqi, as well as the bus ride from Urumqi to the boomtown of Korla 373 miles to the south reveals China's recent investment in wind farms. According to official data, Xinjiang now generates 80 million kilowatts of wind power.

Xinjiang has obviously had a crucial role in fueling the soaring Chinese economy, especially now that this country is producing a large percentage of the world's consumer goods. So logically Beijing has made Xinjiang's stability an imperative in its national strategy to maintain economic growth.

The railway that connects the sprawling cities along China's eastern seaboard to the once inaccessible outposts of Xinjiang is now efficient and affordable. The highways to Xinjiang from other provinces as well as the ones connecting cities within the region are wide and smooth, the result of China's ability to invest its massive currency reserves into infrastructure development and utilize one of its biggest resources of all, its people, to build bridges over massive rivers and dig tunnels through mountains in the middle of nowhere.

China has harnessed the same resources to build a high-altitude highway through the Karakoram mountain pass that links China and Pakistan. It has hopes of using a port on Pakistan's coast on the Arabian Sea as a more efficient route to export cotton and iron ore.

The government presence is evident in other ominous ways: There are checkpoints, presumably to monitor drug trafficking, which has also been a problem in Xinjiang due to its proximity to the poppy fields of Afghanistan. The People's Liberation Army and Air Force also maintain a large presence in Xinjiang. Riding in the back of a car toward the China-Pakistan border, I saw countless electronic-signal-jamming stations that I assumed were used to block Beijing views as potentially subversive radio and television streaming into China from bordering nations. I also frequently witnessed special police teams and military units of 10 to 20 soldiers patrolling the streets of Urumqi and Kashgar.

It is from bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan that Uighur separatists allegedly trained with al-Qaida before they were picked up by U.S. forces or Pakistani bounty hunters and shipped to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

## **Ethnic Strife in China**

*Beijing's efforts to assimilate the Uighurs into greater China have been a mixture of concessions to the Uighur culture while taking a strict approach to the rise of Uighur nationalism.*

The proximity to Pakistan and Afghanistan reminds visitors of the Islamic underpinning in the region — and the fact that religion and faith might be the biggest problems for the Chinese to address.

The Chinese have eased religious restrictions, but mosques are still controlled and scrutinized by the authorities. Several Uighurs in Beijing told me that the government places agents in mosques to report on potential separatist activities, but no one would confirm this in Xinjiang, as they were reluctant to discuss controversially political topics. Most Uighurs can't get passports at all making it difficult to travel to Mecca for the Hajj, even if they could raise the money to afford the trip, said. Almost every Uighur interviewed throughout the region confirmed this allegation. Throughout my travels I never once met a Uighur who had been to Mecca, but the state-run *Xinhua* news agency recently reported more than 30,000 Chinese Muslims have made the pilgrimage over the last 20 years, including 2,800 last year. The report did not give the ethnic breakdown of the Chinese Muslims, which leaves open the possibility that many of those allowed to go were *Hui* an ethnicity comprised of Han descendents who converted to Islam generations ago.

Turkey, because of its democratic government, thriving economy, Muslim culture and linguistic ties to the Uighur is a promised land of sorts. While not nearly as prosperous as Turkey, its neighboring central-Asian states are nearby examples of Eurasian Muslims living free — in Uighur eyes at least — from outside control. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Uighurs saw the rise of Islamic states in former Soviet republics that border Xinjiang and some wondered why they were still under Beijing's control.

But despite their grievances, most Uighurs I talked to did not want to separate from China but said they would be content with more fairness and autonomy as a

minority group within China. One Uighur, whom I call Yusuf, told me how Uighur culture, religion and language are at risk of disappearing as more and more choose to educate their children in Chinese schools to give them a better chance at finding work and a better social status in China.

In China's defense, Beijing has made many efforts to accommodate the Uighurs in recent years. For example, the in-flight meals served on all flights going to and from Xinjiang only serve halal food because of the large Muslim population. The same was true on buses and at the majority of restaurants in Xinjiang. Uighur-language television and radio is widely available throughout Xinjiang and every business and public sign must be labeled in Uighur as well as Chinese.

Even more significantly, the Uighurs are exempt from China's one-child-per-family policy.

With the exception of one young man in Urumqi, only Uighurs in Beijing and Shanghai would talk openly in China. In Xinjiang, most Uighurs were too paranoid of Chinese authorities to go on the record or be seen talking to a journalist. These Uighurs told me they would prefer their own state, and they mentioned Eastern Turkestan. They also cited the fact that the British, Russians and even Americans set up foreign consulates and had recognized it as a country in the 1930s. One 22-year-old kebab seller in Beijing asked me why the United States doesn't do more to help their cause now. Unfortunately, because Chinese censors do their utmost to control communication with outside organizations that could, at least in their view, incite separatism, it is likely that he was completely unaware of the World Uighur Congress.

## **International Reaction to Unrest in Xinjiang**

*With the notable exception of Turkey, foreign government's for the most part have not taken a strong stance on China's recent management of Xinjiang.*

Every riot, bombing and terrorist attack in Xinjiang suggests that Beijing still hasn't found the solution to peacefully integrating a large minority into China effectively and peacefully. The growing international awareness of the conflict has only served to increase pressure on Beijing.

The international Uighur associations and the Chinese government are essentially in a media war. More than half a million Uighurs live in exile, most of them in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, but more than 75,000 live in Europe, Turkey and the United States. Germany has the largest Uighur community in Europe and is home to the World Uighur Congress, which is essentially an umbrella organization that unites Uighur organizations around the world.

But in a nod to China's power and influence on the global economy, especially during a time of recession, international reaction to the plight of the Uighurs has been lukewarm.

The United States walked a fine line, issuing statements regretting violence and encouraging all parties "to exercise restraint," as it did in the White House's official statement after the July uprising in Urumqi.

In its statement after the riots, the European Union said violence in Xinjiang "is a Chinese issue, not a European issue."

Some national leaders were more strident: Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan surprised the world when he went so far as to characterize what has happened as "a kind of genocide" and said his country would bring the matter up in the U.N. Security Council.

But other Muslim nations have been largely restrained over the plight of the Uighurs. The Saudi Arabia-based Organization of the Islamic Conference issued a statement saying "the Islamic world is expecting from China, a major and responsible power in the world arena with historical friendly relations with the Muslim world, to deal

with the problem of Muslim minority in China in broader perspective that tackles the root-causes of the problem."

Japan made headlines by issuing a visa to Kadeer shortly after this summer's clashes.

Kadeer further infuriated China when she claimed that 10,000 Uighurs had disappeared in Urumqi since the riots.

## **Modern Urumqi - A Cosmopolitan City**

***Beijing's efforts to develop Xinjiang are reflected in the province's capital city, which as become a center of international trade and investment.***

I stopped into a Uighur restaurant behind my guesthouse in Urumqi. I was initially drawn to the restaurant by the fragrant aroma of mutton roasting over charcoal. The young Uighur men standing outside in the cold motioned for me to go inside where I was greeted by a middle-aged woman — a Muslim of Han Chinese descent who sat at the cash register collecting money while managing her staff of Uighurs as they did their manual chores. It was just one example of the way the big politics are playing out on the intimately detailed, street level.

I shared the train with an older Han Chinese couple, the Chengs, on the way into Urumqi. They were returning home to Urumqi after visiting family in Shanghai. Cheng Siwei and his wife Paichi were originally deployed to Xinjiang in the 1960s as employees of the Xinjiang Production Construction Corps, commonly referred to as *bingtuan* in Mandarin. The bingtuan began as an organization for the settlement of former revolutionary soldiers in Xinjiang. During the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, it was used to organize and encourage millions of Hans to migrate to Xinjiang. Organized like militia units, the bingtuan have had a controversial history in Xinjiang and the Uighurs have almost always viewed it with suspicion.

After the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Cheng said he was hired at a state-run telecommunications company where he eventually rose to a management position overseeing the installation of phone lines from town to town across Xinjiang. He remembered how when he first arrived in Xinjiang it was impossible to call his family in Shanghai. He was clearly proud of how much Xinjiang had developed since his arrival.

When I asked the Chengs if they missed Shanghai, Mrs. Cheng told me how she cried while riding the train all the way to Urumqi from Xinjiang. They said they went 10 years without visiting their families, but now they call Urumqi home. They've had children who grew up in Urumqi but eventually left Xinjiang to attend universities in Eastern China. It was clear that they had settled in but that they still felt some disconnect.

I stepped out of the station into the baked, windy, and brilliantly bright city of Urumqi, and the skyline of modern glass buildings and wide highways startled me. I was expecting a Central Asian city with a rich Silk Road history to be slightly less dominated by international shopping centers and Chinese chain stores. But underneath the glitziness of the recent construction and development boom is a teeming frontier city where Middle Eastern, Russian and Central Asian traders come for cheap Chinese goods, and Han Chinese entrepreneurs with adventurous spirits bravely come to conquer a rapidly growing local economy that has benefited greatly from Beijing's heavy investments in infrastructure and development in the sometimes volatile region.

I headed to a cheap guesthouse and shared a room with backpackers, some of whom were planning to continue their Silk Road journeys west into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

At Fubar I met Jonathan Tomlin who came to Urumqi several years ago to teach English after completing an outdoor guide certification course in New Zealand. A self-taught expert on the local geography, Tomlin uses Google Earth to find undiscovered valleys and mountain meadows and occasionally leads exploring expeditions as a side business. "I've discovered hidden glacier lakes and Kazakhs who have never seen a non-Kazakh before," Tomlin said excitedly after he understandably guides the conversation away from the politics of the region. After all, he does have a business to run in Xinjiang.

Several outdoor shops selling expensive European and American mountaineering equipment have popped up in Urumqi as interest in exploring Xinjiang's potential as an outdoor adventure location has increased. As more and more Chinese attain middle-class lifestyles it's likely the region will continue to prosper. I wonder if the Uighurs will be able to get a piece of the new industry.

After spending a couple of days wandering around the Uighur and Han sections of Urumqi, including exploring the famous great bazaar and the nearby Erdaoqiao Mosque, I decided it was time to leave.

Disappointingly, a Carrefour department store and a Kentucky Fried Chicken were connected to the mosque, destroying any notion that the Uighurs controlled the commercial activity in Urumqi's largest cultural site. In the shopping center, Xinjiang raisins, nuts, pomegranate juice, clothing, Uighur knives and clothing were for sale. Han

Chinese vendors ran the booths that were in the best proximity to attract foreign tourists. Outside the central market is the Uighur quarter, where you can buy a mixture of souvenirs and daily necessities. Here the traveler can get a taste of the Xinjiang of old, but the scene leaves little doubt about who is in charge.

I decide to catch a bus from Urumqi to the oil boomtown of Korla. As in the Middle East and Texas, oil here is also at the heart of power plays and political maneuvers.

## **Oil boom in China's Wild West**

*In the midst of the dessert, a new city has been built from a small oasis after large reserves of oil and gas were discovered in underground the sun-baked terrain.*

The highway from Urumqi to Korla is wide and smooth. Traffic is sparse. The terrain is rugged, devoid of vegetation. Parts of the highway wind through steep passes carved out of solid rock mountains. The only greenery in the landscape comes near the occasional community or bus stop where small communities live and grow their own vegetables in small gardens. In a country of 1.4 billion, it's difficult to comprehend how this kind of emptiness could exist while the major cities are so densely populated. This terrain could easily be mistaken for stretches of northern Nevada or New Mexico. Much of the land is not even fenced. The snow-capped Tian Shan Mountains loom in the distance.

The landscape is spiked with symmetrical rows of towering German-designed windmills. There are a couple of fuel stops along the way where raisins and other types of halal food are also sold in abundance. Korla sprung out of the desert in the 1950s after the Chinese discovered oil underneath the basin.

Despite the ceaselessly blowing dust, the government recently recognized Korla as the cleanest city in China. Near the center of town lies PetroChina's Tarim Basin Oil Control Center, which operates the oil and gas fields. More than 20 percent of China's total gas supply was produced in the basin last year. Gas is shipped from Korla directly to Shanghai in 2,500-mile-long pipelines.

I meet a tall 36-year-old Han man, Li Panfeng, who sells and repairs computers in Korla. When he hears I am from Texas he immediately brings up Dell computers, because Dell's headquarters is in Texas, and tells me he sells them to the national oil monopoly, PetroChina. Li was born in Korla and went to a university in northeastern China. He takes me to one of the only tourist attractions Korla has to offer, a sea of 300-foot-tall sand dunes in the Taklimakan Desert just north of the city.

On the way out to the dunes, we stop to eat mutton roasted in a large clay tandoor oven. Sitting under a terrace of leafy vines, listening to Uighur music, Li tells me his

home is Xinjiang and he even gives me an impromptu *a capella* version of a Uighur song, translated into Mandarin of course.

When I asked Li about the Uighurs, he pointed to the modern glass buildings and the developed riverside park. "All this development comes from China. The Uighurs have benefited greatly from our investment," he said. "The more concessions we give them, the more they want," he added, referring to Uighur exemptions from some of China's policies, such as the one-child-per-family policy.

## **The Future of the Silk Road**

*With the pace of China's booming economy unlikely to slow in the near term, Beijing continues to invest heavily in the region leaving the question unanswered as to how the Uighurs will fare in the foreseeable future.*

From Korla, I travel to Kuqa. Once a commercial hub on the Silk Road, the city now feels unruly and left out of the development sweeping other parts of Xinjiang. For the first time I feel nervous walking down the main thoroughfare after dark. Large groups of deeply tanned and bearded Uighur men sit outside drinking strong spirits and snacking on plates stacked with lamb skewers. From Kuqa I continue the journey to Kashgar, this time on the train. Kashgar is an old city and major Silk Road hub that has bustled with trade for more than 2,000 years. Kashgar is much closer geographically and culturally to South Asia than to Beijing.

Riding in a taxi from the train station into town, I noticed black Audi's with special license plates for government officials and high ranking Communist Party members zooming past donkey-pulled carts bringing boxes of pomegranates, melons, bails of wool and live sheep into town from rural communities.

The Bank of China is on the east side of the main square, but most symbolic of China's control over the restive region is an enormous statue of Mao Zedong towering over the center of the city.

Finally I see what is left of old Kashgar — a cluster of winding roads and adobe houses that are hundreds of years old surround the north and west sides of the Id Kah Mosque. In front of the mosque is an enormous square, lined with shops selling souvenirs to Chinese and foreign tourists alike.

I meet my friend in Kashgar, a 25-year-old Uighur who I'll refer to as Yusuf. He wishes to keep his real name confidential because of fear that Chinese authorities could detain him for saying anything controversial. He guides me around Kashgar and explains how the central government has recently decreed that most of the traditional adobe homes of Kashgar are not up to earthquake standards and will soon be demolished.

I see Uighur women wearing the full-length black burkas and many of the men with their beards long despite a recent regulation that Uighur men working as civil servants in Kashgar are no longer allowed to wear facial hair at all.

The city is geographically and culturally, closer to Tehran and Islamabad than Beijing, has been a hotbed of rebellion and independence since it first came into contact with the Chinese, more than 2,000 years ago.

I go door to door searching for feedback on the official decision to tear down the old city and rebuild the homes in modern styles — and maybe reduce the chances that people here could disappear in the ancient mazes of these streets, which have proved difficult for the government to scrutinize. I cannot find anyone willing to talk to me. Yusuf tells me that most residents are reluctant to talk to anyone that may be a journalist. But one small, tanned man with large green eyes and a neatly trimmed beard wearing a skullcap says he grew up in this neighborhood, and his father and grandfather had lived in the same home before him. He is saddened about the decision to rebuild the neighborhood. Yusuf adds these neighborhoods are part of what makes Kashgar a magical destination for travelers. But the city has been on edge since August 2008 when a border patrol station was attacked, leaving 16 policemen dead. The police called it a terrorist attack.

On Sunday I visit the famous Sunday market, which is reminiscent of times past. Old bearded men negotiate and barter for sheep, donkeys and the occasional horse. Central Asian traders, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Uighurs continue a tradition that has gone on for centuries.

Yusuf arranged a driver to take us to the Karakul Lake, about halfway between Kashgar and the Pakistan border. Along the way we pass through the Ghez river canyon with red sandstone walls. We also pass through a very intimidating military checkpoint, with guards checking passports and using dogs to check for drugs.

We pass a mining site where a company from Guangzhou, in Southern China near Hong Kong, is chiseling iron ore out of a solid rock mountainside. Even here, in arguably China's most remote region, the economic engine is churning away. The workers are all Han. I jump out of the car to take a few photos. As I do a convoy of military vehicles role

by, followed by a couple of cargo trucks on their way to Pakistan. Yusuf barely seems to notice.

When I board the train in Kashgar to start my long journey back to Beijing and eventually Texas, I'm left meditating on the people who have inhabited this harsh region for thousands of years, as well as those who have navigated this terrain to conquer it. I realize the future of this beautiful ancient city teeming with the life, tradition, cuisine and odors that have aged over several millennia rests in Beijing's ability to gently usher it into the modern world without sacrificing its soul on the way.

Kashgar has survived the rise and fall of all the Chinese empires and maintained its own unique culture in the center of Asia for almost an eternity but the challenges it is facing now are unprecedented. I take one last walk through the maze of adobe buildings dotted by small neighborhood mosques. Old, bearded Uighur men peer out of their doorways with a watchful eye as their grandchildren play in the winding alleyways. I wonder if these children will be the last generation to grow up in these ancient streets.

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