

A Brief History of Xinjiang

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region encompasses one-sixth of the land mass of the People's Republic of China. It is three times the size of France and larger than California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Montana, Arizona, and Idaho combined. If Xinjiang were a separate country, it would be the sixteenth largest in the world. In past centuries, a number of significant states ruled in this area. But for the most part, this region has been controlled by separate rulers in the southern areas, and by outside forces in the north, northwest, and east. Xinjiang, past and present, includes various peoples, multiple religions and cultures, and a long tradition of interactions among them. The history of this region is very complex and recorded in multiple languages, making it difficult for scholars to unravel.

Topography

Two mountain ranges stretch across Xinjiang, the Kunlun Shan in the south and the Tian Shan in the north central region. To the north of the Tian Shan is the Zunghar basin. At its heart lies a desert, but this basin also includes steppes and mountain slopes that have traditionally supported nomadic cultures. Between the two mountain ranges lies the enormous Tarim basin and the uninhabitable Taklimakan Desert covering 327,000 square kilometers. Around this vast desert, however, lie multiple oases fed by mountain rivers. Fertile land and plentiful water in these oases attracted settlers who founded a series of towns all along the base of the mountains, thus creating routes of communication between Central Asia and China.

Cultural and Commercial Conduit

The Tarim basin oases were once part of the famous trade routes known as the Silk Road that linked China with the Middle East and Europe. Far more than goods traveled along these routes; they served for centuries as cultural transmitters. Religions from Persia, such as Judaism and Nestorian Christianity, and Buddhism from India reached China via

these routes.¹ The links with Persia and Central Asia also brought knowledge of astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and musical instruments through the oases to China. Flowing from east to west, knowledge of papermaking in China ultimately reached Europe by way of these trade routes. Techniques and motifs from Chinese paintings appeared in Persian art.² As a result of their role as transmitters of knowledge, many oases flourished culturally.

The Uyghur People

The Uyghur people, the dominant ethnic group in Xinjiang today, are a Turkic people who were once part of the Türk empire. In 744, the Uyghur together with other tribes overthrew the Türk ruling house and established an empire based in central Mongolia. It included the Zunghar basin region. In 840, this empire was attacked by the Kirghiz and the Uyghur tribes scattered. They settled north and south of the Tian Shan in the locations that are now Ürümqi and Turpan. Out of their capital in Turpan, Uyghur kings ruled the state they named Qocho until the thirteenth century. This was followed by Mongol rule until the seventeenth century. Like most Turkic peoples in Central Asia, Uyghurs once believed in religions like shamanism, Buddhism, and Manichaeism. In the tenth century, Islam came to the region from Central Asia. By the mid-fifteenth century, almost all Uyghur people were Muslim.

Chinese Presence in Xinjiang

In the second century B.C.E. China's Han dynasty rulers sent armies into Tarim basin oases to counter the power of their northern neighbor, the Xiongnu empire. The Chinese established garrisons and for about three centuries the two empires struggled for dominance. In the seventh century, the ruling Tang dynasty of China had strong influence over what is now eastern Xinjiang. Once again, the situation was highly changeable. For a total of 100 years, broken into two periods, the Chinese had "relatively firm sovereignty

¹ Persia is present-day Iran.

² Millward, James A., and Peter C. Perdue. "Political and Cultural History of the Xinjiang Region through the Late Nineteenth Century." *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*. S. Frederick Starr, ed. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004. 31-32.

over the Tarim [basin] city-states.”³ After the Tang dynasty forces withdrew, the Chinese had no control over what is now Xinjiang for 1,000 years. Then in 1759, the Qing dynasty that ruled China added the region to its empire.⁴ The Qing created the entity “Xinjiang,” which means “New Frontier.” At the time it had a population of approximately 600,000 people.⁵

Changes Under the Qing

The Qing was the first power in China which, in addition to having a military presence in Xinjiang, established in some areas a civil administration resembling local government in China proper. Although Qing military personnel and their families numbered about 100,000, they tended to work in cooperation with local leadership and usually avoided intervening in local affairs. Officials urged soldiers to settle permanently in the region with their families by offering long-term land leases. Up until 1781, the government also promoted civilian immigration to eastern and northern Xinjiang by giving those willing to relocate animals, tools, seeds, and short-term tax relief. By 1800, new settlers comprised 25 percent of Xinjiang’s civilian population. After 1831, Chinese farmers were permitted to settle in the Tarim basin, too.⁶ The Qing government also used Xinjiang as a very distant place of exile for those who displeased the court.⁷

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the government’s control over Xinjiang weakened. Between 1876 and 1881, after a major rebellion in the area, the Qing reestablished its dominance for strategic reasons. In 1884, despite strong opposition by many top government officials who saw Xinjiang as of little use, the Qing added the region to its list of provinces. Xinjiang began to be administered by ethnic Han Chinese

³ Millward and Perdue, 39.

⁴ The Qing dynasty was established by the Manchu people from what is now northeastern China, not by the Han Chinese. See Chapters 3-7.

⁵ Millward and Perdue, 57.

⁶ Millard and Perdue, 58.

⁷ Lin Zexu, who tried so earnestly to rid Guangzhou (Canton) of opium smuggling, was among the scholar-officials exiled to Xinjiang. See Chapter 5, “A Closer Look.”

officials, the same as all other provinces. Han immigration into this frontier increased as did efforts to assimilate Uyghur people into Chinese civilization. But the Qing dynasty, embroiled in other, more pressing matters, had little energy and fewer funds to govern this distant province successfully. After the fall of the dynasty (1911), as Chinese parties fought among themselves, the Uyghurs succeeded in establishing an independent Islamic East Turkestan Republic, first in 1933 and again in 1944. Once the Chinese Communist Party founded the People's Republic of China in 1949, however, Chinese troops moved into the region and reclaimed Xinjiang as a province of China. The population of Xinjiang was between 4 and 5 million at the time, of whom 300,000 were Han Chinese. In 1955, the Chinese government designated the region as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Xinjiang Since Deng Xiaoping

Xinjiang shares a border with eight countries: India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Mongolia. Of these, five are largely Muslim and three (plus China) are nuclear powers.⁸ As in the Qing dynasty, Xinjiang continues to function strategically as a buffer zone for China. In addition, Xinjiang is rich in natural resources: minerals, coal, oil, and natural gas.⁹ It is also the site of China's only nuclear and missile test range.

The Uyghur people of Xinjiang may be a case study for an issue occurring throughout the world today: how does an indigenous culture survive in a rapidly globalizing, multiethnic world? The People's Republic of China has asserted its historic claim over the region as an indisputable part of China's multiethnic state. Though Muslim Uyghurs note that they have a history of independence distinct from China, current realities make independence a remote possibility. Many see as more pressing the need for the Uyghur people of Xinjiang to gain greater autonomy over their religious lives, and to take steps to retain their cultural identity, while remaining part of a rapidly modernizing China.

⁸ India, Pakistan, and Russia.

⁹ Coal reserves are about 38 percent of China's total. Oil and natural gas reserves are estimated at 30 billion tons, about 25 percent of the country's total reserves. www.china.org.cn August 2007.

Since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms went into effect in the 1980s, the impact on Xinjiang has been enormous. The region has the highest per capita GDP of any province outside the coastal areas. Not only has Ürümqi, the capital, emerged as one of China's boom towns, but once-isolated Uyghur cultural centers like Kashgar in the far west are also developing. Building cranes can be seen throughout Kashgar along with hundreds of new cement buildings, advertising their wares in large Chinese script with Uyghur written in a smaller font below. In 1987, China opened Xinjiang's western border, ending the forty-year isolation from the region's Central Asian neighbors and allowing the renewal of centuries-old trade.

In 2001, the Chinese government announced its "Great Opening Up and Development of the Western Regions" program (*xibu da kaifa*). The intent was to pump \$12 billion into Xinjiang's infrastructure, launching some 700 major projects in communication, transport, large-scale industry, and energy development. New roads connect Xinjiang more efficiently to other parts of China as well as to Central Asian republics. Ironically, the improvements have also contributed to a higher regional and ethnic consciousness. In 1999, a new rail line from Ürümqi to Kashgar opened up. In the summer of 2007, bus service began between Kashgar and the country of Pakistan. Private investment from China is also booming.

The Chinese have made attempts to accommodate their Uyghur countrymen. They have loosened the One-Child Policy for all ethnic groups, which may help to offset fears of the growing Han population in their region. China also allows Uyghur Muslims to bury their dead in keeping with Islamic tradition. "Affirmative action" for all ethnic minority students permits their admission to universities despite lower scores relative to the majority Han Chinese.

Some Uyghurs, however, are not satisfied by the overtures of the Chinese government. They resent the increasing numbers of Han Chinese immigrants. The population of

Xinjiang is presently around 20 million, of whom more than 8 million are Han Chinese.¹⁰ Signs of Uyghur resentment of Chinese rule have been evident in recent decades. In 1986 there was rioting against nuclear testing in Xinjiang. In the 1990s, bombs exploded in protest of Chinese control of Xinjiang. These acts by extremists catch attention, but more subtle forms of resistance to Beijing's control occur daily. For example, the Uyghur set their clocks and watches two hours behind the single official time zone in the rest of China. Some see this as a way to express their distinction, while others are concerned about the long-term erosion of their culture. Organizations such as Human Rights Watch have charged the Chinese government with using the United States' War on Terror as an excuse to diminish a Uyghur sense of identity and even as an attempt to diminish the role of Islam in the lives of believers.¹¹ In the last several years there has been an increase in the number of Uyghurs, including a Canadian national, who have been jailed. Keenly aware of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, followed by the founding of the independent neighboring states of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, and cognizant of the rise of Islamic extremists, the Chinese government sees Uyghur separatists as a serious threat to stability and responds quickly and often harshly.

In Ürümqi, ethnic and religious hostilities turned deadly in July of 2009, when severe riots broke out between Han and Uyghur communities and the police. While the cause is disputed, the riots left roughly 200 people dead, and many hundreds injured and detained without open trials. Violent outbreaks on a smaller scale have continued through 2011, and the region remains unstable. A year after the Ürümqi riots, the Chinese government responded by announcing a new policy package centered on calming discontent through "leapfrog development," or massive investment to boost the economy and improve living

¹⁰ In 1953, Han Chinese comprised 6 percent of Xinjiang's population. Toops, Stanley W. "The Demography of Xinjiang." *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*. S. Frederick Starr, ed. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004. 246.

By 2008, they represented over 40 percent. Battacharji, Preeti. "Uighurs and China's Xinjiang region." Council on Foreign Relations. 29 May, 2012. www.cfr.org/china/uighurs-chinas-xinjiang-region/p16870

¹¹ "Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang." Human Rights Watch. January 2006. <http://hrw.org/reports/2005/china0405/>

standards for all groups. The creation of a new Special Economic Zone in Kashgar, reforms to oil and gas taxes to benefit Xinjiang, and changes to Han leadership are all attempts to reduce Uyghur dissatisfaction. However, Chinese investments are widely perceived by Uyghurs as unevenly benefitting the Han in Xinjiang, and heavy-handed restrictions on the practice and teaching of Islam, as well as the 2009-2011 destruction of much of the old city of Kashgar in favor of Chinese-style apartments, have done little to assure Uyghurs that their interests and culture are being protected.

Schools represent another landscape on which Chinese and Uyghur cultural values contend. On one hand, government leaders see schools as a place to reach mutual understanding among China's myriad ethnic groups, and more specifically, to open doors for Uyghur children. On the other hand, even schools show both potential and problems for the Uyghur people as they strive to maintain their heritage. Some parents prefer to send their children to Uyghur schools, where they can learn the Koran and their own cultural traditions. But Chinese universities will not admit graduates of Uyghur-language schools. The Chinese government selects the best students from ethnic minorities in all schools in Xinjiang (and Tibet) and offers them all-expenses-paid places at top schools in eastern China. While this obviously provides students with an excellent education and opportunities for advancement, some worry about the effect of immersing the brightest of the next generation so completely in Chinese culture and values. As China and the world modernizes at a rapid pace, Uyghur society will face more challenges. The hope is that the Turkic peoples who have lived at the crossroads to multiple civilizations for millennia can continue to preserve their rich cultural heritage.

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