Profile

Uyghurs speak a south-eastern Turkic language and are thought to currently number around 10.1 million, though some groups assert that their numbers are much higher. They tend to be mainly concentrated in the north-western corner of China and, until recently, a substantial majority in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The XUAR is China’s largest province, comprising roughly one sixth of its total landmass, is rich in natural resources, and strategically located, sharing borders with eight other countries. Most Uyghurs are Sunni Muslims. The Uyghurs are a majority in western XUAR and in the Turpan prefecture, while Han Chinese are the majority in most major cities and in the east and north. There are also Uyghurs found in Hunan province in south-central China.

Historical context

China’s Uyghur minority are a remnant of the vast Uyghur Empire which stretched from the Caspian Sea to Manchuria in the eighth century, eventually to be overrun by other tribes in much of Central Asia. During many centuries, various Uyghur, Mongol and Chinese regimes ruled the region.

The name, Xinjiang, means ‘new frontier’ in Mandarin, which many Uyghur rights advocates point out actually counters China’s claims of an ancient unbroken domination. For Uyghurs free to express discursive resistance to Chinese occupation, the preferred name is East Turkestan. Much of what is today Xinjiang was ruled by or owed allegiance to the Mongols from the thirteenth century. Various Uyghur and Mongol khanates exerted authority over different parts of the region, with the Manchu Qing Empire entering the area and controlling all of it by about the mid-eighteenth century. For a brief period after 1864, Xinjiang was to break away from the Qing Empire while China was weakened by other conflicts and unable to maintain its garrisons in the distant province. Chinese control was reasserted in 1877.

The end of the Qing Dynasty and the creation of the Republic of China in 1912 were followed by a period of weak central government control over Xinjiang. A rebellion in the 1930s (in reaction to a large degree to heavy taxes on Uyghurs to finance Han migration and settlement on some of the province’s best agricultural land) resulted in the establishment of the first
modern Uyghur state in 1933. The East Turkestan Republic was centred mainly in the southern region of Kashgar and Khotan. It survived only one year and returned to the control of the Han Chinese under warlord Sheng Shicai. Parts of northern Xinjiang were to form the second East Turkestan Republic between 1944 and 1949 under Ahmetjan Qasimi, Isa Yusuf Alptekin and others. The Uyghurs’ taste of independence was brought to an end in 1949. In August, Ahmetjan Qasimi and other Uyghur leaders were invited to speak with Mao in Beijing about Uyghur independence, which had been tentatively promised in exchange for Uyghurs supporting the Communists in their civil war with the Kuomingtang. However, the plane mysteriously crashed on its way to Beijing. The death of so many Uyghur leaders was kept a secret for months, until the PLA had fully occupied the region.

One notable Uyghur leader who was not on the plane, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, recognizing the encroaching PLA forces for what they represented, led a major diaspora of Uyghurs from Xinjiang. By 1952, owing to Alptekin’s efforts, pressure from the US and the newly established UN refugee agency, UNHCR, Turkey accepted some 2,000 Uyghur refugees for resettlement. Turkey remains a supportive cultural and political host country for Uyghur refugees today.

The region took its current shape as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on 1 October 1955. Tensions and resentment, despite some early idealistic moves that were receptive to the rights of nationalities, quickly increased when Chinese Communist authorities began to clearly favour Han Chinese. There were initial statements by the Communists criticizing past Han nationalism and promising that Xinjiang would remain in control of its nationalities, since they had a right of self-determination, but real power in the post-1955 XUAR appeared to be held in practice by the Han Chinese cadres.

While no segment of Chinese society escaped the effects of the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward, most accounts agree that the Uyghurs in Xinjiang appeared to be particularly targeted, with between 60,000 and 100,000 Uyghurs and Kazakhs fleeing the country after 1962 to avoid repression and famine.

Resentment of and resistance to government-supported migration or support of Han Chinese to the detriment of Uyghurs, restrictions on their religious and cultural practices, and loss of land have periodically caused eruptions of violence in the region. There were student demonstrations and riots in the 1980s linked to opposition to an announced expansion of Han migration and the Baren Township riot in 1990, where at least 50 people were killed (some reports claim there were hundreds) following a government decision to close down a local mosque. This subsequently led to a series of riots in other parts of Xinjiang.

Numerous bombing incidents in Xinjiang and Beijing itself – blamed on Uyghur extremists – occurred in 1997, as well as attacks against Chinese soldiers and officials. Widespread demonstrations and street fighting followed the arrest of suspected separatists during Ramadan.
The overall effect of the Communist Party of China’s policies in the last six decades, one of the main sources of the tensions and resentment in the region, is unmistakable and stunning: The Han population in the region increased at an average rate of 8.1 per cent yearly, from 5 per cent in 1947 to around 40 per cent in 2000. Officially the 2010 Census puts the Xinjiang population at 45.8 per cent Uyghur and 40.5 per cent Han, with Kazakh, Hui, and other ethnicities making up the rest. However, these figures fail to capture the high numbers of long term resident Han migrant workers and thousands of security personnel in Xinjiang.

The capital of the province itself went from being a city where the Uyghurs were the clear majority (their proportion being about 80 per cent) to one where the Uyghurs have been almost completely displaced, and where it is now the Han Chinese who constitute about 80 per cent of the total population. In Kashgar, an urban redesign project aims to demolish some 65,000 homes and resettle over 200,000 Uyghur residents, 85 per cent of Kashgar’s old city. Anthropologist Jay Dautcher argues that Uyghur residential neighborhoods, or mehelle, have been critical components in the production of Uyghur culture for hundreds of years. Traditional architecture and how residents socialize within the physical space is especially formative in the construction of gender identity. While some Uyghurs embraced the opportunity to move to more modern housing, many feel the forced relocation from traditional homes in the ancient center to high-rise apartments on the outskirts is more of an assault on culture than a sign of modernity.

As the demographic weight of the Uyghurs is thus reduced, use of their language and the practice of other cultural and religious activities closely linked to Uyghur identity are being increasingly restricted by Chinese authorities who more and more openly espouse a pro-Han chauvinism. Schools and universities are increasingly being required to teach in Mandarin rather than Uyghur.

Current issues

The strategic position of Xinjiang and the potential for ethnic unrest translates into a high degree of control of the region and of the affairs of the Uyghur minority by central authorities. Decision-making is concentrated in the centrally appointed Party structure and in Beijing, thereby excluding ethnic Uyghurs. Two additional factors contribute to this configuration: the role of the paramilitary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, directly under the State Council and virtually independent of the government; and the extremely limited power granted to national minorities, in particular Uyghurs, in the government and the Party – even compared to other national minority areas of China.

Until recently, the large number of Uyghurs constituted a substantial majority in Xinjiang. Legislation and regulations are supposed to guarantee them minority and language rights as well as prohibit discrimination. However, the control and role which one would expect the Uyghurs to be able to exercise over the operations of administrative units has been nearly eliminated over the years, along with the language requirements for job opportunities within government offices, and an expansion of laws criminalizing almost every facet of Uyghur culture and identity, have resulted in ever increasing marginalization in their own land.
Since the mid-1990s, the gradual exclusion of Uyghurs from state-based employment – and the rising number of private jobs is stunning and statistically verifiable from a variety of sources. While Han Chinese have been able to secure employment, ethnic Uyghurs have been kept out of construction jobs, road-building projects and oil and gas pipelines. Even for Uyghurs with graduate degrees they are only employed at an estimated 15 per cent and according to a 2013 study Uyghurs earn an average of 59 per cent of what their Han counterparts earn.

As with the Mongolian and Tibetan minorities, access to employment is increasingly a contentious issue for the Uyghur minority, a function of discriminatory Han-only hiring practices and privileging of Mandarin speakers. State authorities in the region refuse to recognize any concrete entitlement to Uyghur beyond education. The reduction of bilingual services provided by state authorities has resulted in the removing of bilingual employment opportunities, which would have meant the employment of more Uyghurs, whereas increased monolingual state operations have led to a much higher proportion of Han Chinese being preferred in almost all fields of employment. For example, in 2013, 72 per cent of all open civil service positions were open only to Han Chinese. The massive Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps employs 86 per cent Han. Additional sectors that advertise ‘Han only’ recruitment run the full spectrum of the economy, from firefighters, bank employees, accountants, and broadcasters to construction workers, chefs, and farmers. When it comes to employment, Uyghur women were identified in 2012 as the most disadvantaged demographic in China.

Even the few areas where use of Uyghur was associated with job opportunities – such as in education -have seen a rapid reduction since 2000. From the late 1980s, Chinese-language instruction became more prominent, whereas instruction in Uyghur began to be curtailed, sometimes through the process of merging Chinese and Uyghur schools with the foreseeable result that these schools would teach almost exclusively in Mandarin. Xinjiang University, initially established in 1949 as a bilingual (Uyghur/Mandarin) university, has all but cast away instruction in Uyghur since 2002. The same throughout all levels of education, Uyghur language instruction is almost exclusively limited to literature, while all other classes are taught in Mandarin. Curriculum focuses on ‘patriotic education’ that leaves a marginal role for Uyghur culture and history. Uyghur teachers are also discriminated against in such a system. Most Han teachers only speak Mandarin, despite requirements in the Ethnic Autonomy Law, while Uyghur teachers are required to speak both Uyghur and Mandarin and are often fired in preference for Han teachers with better Mandarin. Uyghurs who have attempted to open private language centers have also suffered under discriminatory policies, such as Abduweli Ayup who in 2013 was sentenced to 18 months for ‘illegal fund-raising’ for his efforts to found a Uyghur language kindergarten.

In a shocking turn of events, Uyghur economist and rights defender, Ilham Tohti, was tried in a closed-door trial in September 2014 and sentenced to life in prison on baseless separatism charges. He lost his appeal. In an essay published after his imprisonment, Tohti wrote that, ‘In recent years, Uyghur fears of cultural and linguistic annihilation have been greatly exacerbated
by a sharp contraction in Xinjiang’s local-language publishing and cultural industries.’ In October 2016, Tohti was awarded the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders.

A continuing issue for the Uyghur minority is the role and dominating impact of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps – a body which is probably best described as an economic and semi-military quasi-state organization. Operating almost completely outside the control of the XUAR authorities since 1981, it has de facto administrative authority over a number of cities, settlements and farms all across Xinjiang. It has coordinated the settlement and employment of millions of Han Chinese in the area and continues to fulfil administrative functions such as health care, printed and electronic media and education for areas under its jurisdiction. This includes primary, secondary and tertiary education (with two universities, Shihezi University and Tarim University). It has control over 16 million mu (over 2.5 million acres) of farmland, representing about a third of the Xinjiang’s arable land. Its operations are essentially exclusively in Mandarin, thus acting as an important agent in the sinicization of the XUAR, and of the growing exclusion and disempowerment of the Uyghur minority. This is part of an overt government policy of supporting massive Han migration into the region in order to weaken the demographic and political weight of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang – which is a dangerous source of frustration and resentment.

Another issue that has emerged is the right of members of a minority to their name in their own language, which is protected under international law under the right to private and family life. A policy adopted in 2002 required that Uyghur names be changed into Chinese pinyin. In 2015, Hotan initiated a ban on Uyghur parents giving their children Islamic names which have been used by Uyghur parents for generations and are an integral part of Uyghur identity. In April 2017, the policy was extended to the whole of the XUAR. Children named in violation of this policy may be barred from household-registration, denying free access to health and education.

Another contentious issue involves the freedom of religion of Uyghurs and the crackdown by authorities in the name of security and the fight against terrorism and separatism. The religious activities of Muslims in Xinjiang are subjected to extensive controls and restrictions which are not applied to any other part of China: a special regulation of the XUAR bans minors from participating in religious activities, resulting in authorities prohibiting teaching of Islam to school-age children, and imposing hefty punishments on parents found in violation. Since 2015, increasingly repressive measures have been passed such as banning face veils in public, criminalizing men with beards, and forbidding Uyghur students from observing fast during Ramadan, and thousands of mosques have been demolished. Any type of unsanctioned religious activity in Xinjiang risks much more serious consequences than in other parts of China, with the result that Uyghurs are likely to be arrested and detained for extremely long periods in the name of fighting extremism, even for innocuous activities.

On 5 July 2009, a planned nonviolent demonstration by Uyghurs frustrated by the failure of Chinese authorities to investigate the murder of a Uyghur migrant worker in Southern China the previous month turned violent. An estimated 200 people were killed, most of them Han,
and another some 1,700 were injured. Over the ensuing days, Han vigilantes assaulted Uyghur bystanders as the government shut down internet access to the entire province of 21.8 million people, imposing significant obstacles to independent investigations. The internet lockdown lasted for 10 months. During this time, Chinese authorities detained hundreds, if not thousands, of Uyghurs, many who were disappeared and never released or tried. Since 2009, episodes of violent resistance have occurred by Uyghurs who have been systematically denied nonviolent avenues for redress. While violent crimes require a measured law enforcement response, human rights groups have argued that the repressive militarization of Xinjiang and indiscriminate policing only exacerbate the problem and have led to a spiral of violence. In March 2014, more than 30 people were killed outside of a train station in Kunming, Yunnan province by a group subsequently reported to be Xinjiang separatists. In May 2014, two cars loaded with explosives ploughed through a busy shopping street in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang province, killing around 30 people. Following the Urumqi bombing, China announced a year-long anti-terrorism crackdown with the Xinjiang party chief, Zhang Chunxian, acknowledging the necessity for ‘unconventional measures’ in the ‘people’s war’ against terrorism. Mosques and private residences were searched, residents harassed and intimidated with impunity by the police and arbitrary arrests and disappearances increased. In 2015, the Uyghur Human Rights Project reported that as many as 700 people had died in Xinjiang during 2013 and 2014. In the subsequent years, regional and national security laws have only become increasingly repressive.

Beginning in 2016, previously prefecture-level travel regulations were imposed across all of Xinjiang, in violation of the freedom of movement and impacting Uyghur’s ability to participate in religion pilgrimage or seek employment opportunities. In 2016, the Xinjiang government announced a blanket recall of all passports, a measure already implemented under Chen Quanguo in Tibet. Throughout 2016 and into 2017, the government in Xinjiang implemented mandatory health examinations and forced collection of DNA. The apparent profiling of Uyghurs, collection of DNA not part of an active criminal investigation, and the lack of privacy controls or other legal protections raises series concerns over the scope and purpose of the policy.

*Updated November 2017*