Xinjiang:
The History and Context of Modern Issues

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The center of Chinese culture has always been on the coast and from there its influence spread throughout rest of the country and also to much of Asia. However, cultural and political influence can only spread so far. On the northwestern reaches of China's frontier is the region of Xinjiang, far removed both geographically and culturally from the rest of China. Xinjiang is home to roughly 21 million people with the population split almost evenly between the Han and Uyghur ethnic groups. The Han are the majority ethnic group, both in terms of population and cultural influence in China. The Uyghurs are a Turkic people, predominantly Muslim, who are concentrated almost entirely in the province of Xinjiang. In recent years, the conflict between the Uyghurs and the Han has resulted in increased tensions and many protests and riots. It would be easy to ascribe these tensions to religious and cultural differences, however, this is an inaccurate oversimplification of the problems plaguing the region. The ethnic tensions stem from more than just religion and the recent affairs in Xinjiang fail to highlight the long and cyclical history of resistance against the Chinese government. To better understand the current state of Xinjiang, it is necessary to understand both the history of how Xinjiang became part of China, and the manner in which ethnic minorities in China are treated by the government.

The region that became Xinjiang has a long history of conflict and turmoil. It has often been coveted by China because of its geographic position, but others, namely the Mongol Empire, have also laid claim to Xinjiang. Many of the empires that sought control over Xinjiang were considerable threats to China. The Mongol empire would occupy Xinjiang and swathes of Eurasia and would eventually conquer China, forming the Yuan dynasty. Concerns for safety, Xinjiang's strategic geographic position, and fears about the vulnerability of the bordering regions to invasion led later Chinese dynasties, including its last, the Qing, to desire Xinjiang. The religious practices of the peoples of Xinjiang shifted from Tengriism, and other traditional practices, to Islam

due to the spread of Muslim empires and the influence of Arab traders who travelled and traded on the Silk Road.[1] This shift towards Islam was the ethnogenesis of the Uyghur peoples, and served to separate them from the practices and beliefs of both the Han peoples and the Zhungars, who ruled Xinjiang prior to its incorporation into China.

After the Mongol conquests, Xinjiang came under the rule of the Tibetan Buddhist Zhungars. The Zhungars, also known as Kalmyks, were part of the Oirat ethnic group, who were of Mongolian extraction. Just as the Qing were expansionist and thus unlike previous Chinese dynasties, the Zhungars were much more imperialistic and centralized than the previous Mongol and Turkic nomadic empires had been.[2] Their rule was more stable, and their innovations in tactics and technology made them a legitimate threat to Qing China. They utilized the method of mounting cannons upon the backs of camels much like other Islamic "Gunpowder" empires. Xinjiang, along with the other former nomadic lands in Central Asia, would be conquered and claimed by the Ottomans, Persians, Mughals, Tsarist Russia and Qing China. These conquests are one of the major factors that allowed the Qing to conquer Zhungaria and Xinjiang, as the Zhungars were pressured from all directions by larger, stronger, and better-provisioned foes and denied access to any form of strategic alliance.[3] This led to the eventual collapse of Zhungar Xinjian more than any particular victories by the would-be conquerors.[4]

Though the Qing had initially planned on dividing control of Xinjian among local powers, this resulted in further conflict. Amursana, the Qing-installed leader in one of the provinces of Xinjiang, became ambitious and attacked the Qing. He declared that he would be the leader of the people and place lands in Zhungaria under Chinese rule; he then attacked Qing forces and interests in the area. The response by the Qing was complete extermination, bordering on genocide. Women and children were to be spared but enslaved, and smallpox, starvation, and cultural destruction effectively destroyed the Zhungar as a distinct

[1] James A. Milward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press 2007), 79.
[2] Ibid., 89.
[3] Ibid., 95.
[4] Ibid.

people.[5] These actions, atypical of the Qing's expansionist tactics, are often considered genocidal in their ruthless attempt to punish and deal with the Zhungars.[6] By this time, the economic viability of annexing the region had effectively been nullified with the end of the Silk Road, and the primary justification became defensive. The attempts to back up the assertion that controlling Xinjiang protected China would become the foundation of Xinjiang being considered a necessary buffer zone to protect central China.[7]

The Qing were at first reluctant to attempt to assimilate Xinjiang, fearing the potential trouble it could cause in the region, but they would ultimately begin large scale attempts to assimilate the local peoples in the mid-1800s. This proved difficult, however, as the remaining peoples of Xinjiang found more solace in Islamic identity than in anything relating to Mongol and Turkic empires and lineages. Since the Qing's tactics were often focused on exploiting their ability to make claim on these lineages it was ineffective on the people of Xinjiang who derived more of their cultural identity in Islam rendering these attempts moot.[8] It was in these early years that the Uyghur identity saw much of its formation, especially the antagonism towards Chinese governance. The modern Uyghurs are at best distantly related to the historic Uyghur peoples of Central Asia, and their identity, like any culture, is a valid and important part of their lives. One of the most important points about the ethnogenesis of the Uyghur identity is that it was coterminous with the growth of antagonism towards the Chinese government, and this meant their identity was most easily rendered through their relationship with the Chinese state.[9]

The justification for controlling Xinjiang to ensure national defense was legitimized in the 1900s as a result of two Uyghur-led independence movements. Both attempts were prompted by connections to the Soviet Union with one directly supported by the Soviet government. Throughout the 1920s, because of Xinjiang's geographic isolation from the rest of China and diplomatic overtures made by Yang Zengxin, the appointed ruler of Xinjiang, significant trade connections

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[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 97.
[8] Ibid., 107.
[9] Dru C.Gladney, *Dislocating China: Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 210.

were made between Xinjiang and the Soviet Union. Nearing the end of the decade, Xinjiang's trade with the USSR would outmatch its trade with the rest of China by ten times.[10] It was also during this time that greater cultural connections with the USSR and Turkic peoples living within its border were established lessening the isolation and barriers between Xinjiang and its non-Chinese neighbor.[11] The end of Uyghur isolation in Xinjiang and the continued separation, both culturally and geographically with the rest of China, would lead to dissatisfaction with the ruling Guomintang Party and their policies of assimilation. These factors would fuel a growing antagonism between the Uyghurs and the rest of China

After the assassination of Yang Zengxin, and execution of his usurper, the power within Xinjiang came to rest with the Guomintang-supported Jin Shuren. Zengxin's hardline, and largely successful, policies were dropped by Shuren, plunging Xinjiang into economic deficit and aggravating ethnic tensions within the region.[12] These policies changed social and political hierarchies and immediately exploited the Uyghurs. Agricultural lands were seized and given to internal Chinese refugees who would become permanent residents of Xinjiang.[13] These unequal policies heavily benefitted the Han refugees and penalized Uyghurs for no reason other than preferential treatment based on ethnicity. These actions by the Guomintang government quickly inflamed tensions and led to rebellion in the region.

In 1931, the first large rebellion in Xinjiang seen in recent times began. Its origin can be found in the Uyghur attack and murder of a Chinese tax collector and police chief who had coerced a Uyghur man to let him marry his daughter. The Uyghurs then secured weapons from police garrisons, murdered one hundred Chinese families that had migrated from Gansu, and buried their heads in fields to show their disapproval with the recent immigrations into Xinjiang from the rest of China.[14] The movement grew significantly larger, to the point of threatening the province. Shuren's attempts to combat and quell the rebellion were often misguided, and his hardline tactics encouraged the

[10] Milward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, 186.
[11] Ibid., 187.
[12] Ibid., 189.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 191.

Uyghurs, at risk of death whether they fought or surrendered, to fight. Ma Zhongying, a warlord of Hui descent and pedigree, came to Xinjiang first as the ally of the Uyghurs against the provincial government, and then as an envoy of the Guomintang to crush the rebellion. He succeeded against the Uyghurs and demolished a short-lived independence movement in East Turkestan that left the Guomintang to exert greater control over the region.

In the time between the first and second independence movements, Xinjiang was a flurry of revolts, oppression, and shifting allegiance and influence between the Soviets and Guomintang until 1944. In October of 1944, a group of rebels partially composed of Uyghur runaways trained by the Soviets began an assault on a small town and headed for the local district capital.[15] In response, the Guomintang arrested hundreds of Uyghurs. Many of those arrested were suspected to have been among the several hundred mutilated bodies found in a well near a Guomintang police station that prompted the rebels to massacre the Han Chinese within the city.[16] As the rebellion formed into a second independence movement, the East Turkestan Republic had considerable success in fending off the Guomintang, but as a result of political dealings at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, the Guomintang's military leadership convinced the Soviet Union to encourage the East Turkestan Republic to seek a ceasefire.[17] Conflict and problems continued until Xinjiang was incorporated into the People's Republic of China resulting in some stabilization and concessions being made to the Turkic nationalists. [18]

The East Turkestan Movement, while no longer substantial enough to launch uprisings and rebellions, remains an influence on the culture of Xinjiang, and the region's tumultuous history continues to be reflected in recent events. In January 2008, police arrested Mutallip Hajim, an influential businessman in Xinjiang, for his involvement with Muslim Schools. He died while in custody.[19] His remains were returned to his family in March, and shortly after, the news of his death

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[15] Ibid., 215.
[16] Ibid., 216.
[17] Ibid., 217.
[18] Ibid., 224.
[19] Simon Elegant, "The Other 'Tibet,'" *Time*, April 16, 2008, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1731474,00.html.

acted as trigger for what became a year of general unrest within Xinjiang. The riots initially involved hundreds of protesters, and subsequent large-scale arrests caused numbers to swell into the thousands. While Mutallip Hajim's death is considered to be a major cause of the protests, restrictions on religious expression by the Chinese government also played a part. In addition to the demonstrations, there were numerous bombings and assaults on police throughout the year. Mass arrests occurred, including an incident involving seventy arrests in Kashgar for fear people might interfere with the passage of the Olympic torch through town on its way to Beijing.[20]

While the unrest eventually died down, it spiked again the next year. In June, at a toy factory in Guangdong a fight began over the accusation that Uyghur migrant workers had sexually assaulted Han women.[21] It grew to involve a huge number of people, with conflicting estimates ranging from one hundred injured to over 400.[22] Uyghur groups claim a higher number of casualties than the Chinese government reports. The government said only two deaths occurred while Uyghurs organizations claimed over a hundred. These conflicting claims resulted in large protests in Xinjiang. In Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, on July 5th a protest involving over a thousand Uyghurs culminated in a violent riot, which according to Uyghur groups was the result of police escalation, and they cites much larger numbers of participants: up to 3000.[23]

The often clashing reports by exile Uyghur groups and the government make it difficult to ascertain the exact number of people involved, and the casualties that ensued from riots and protests. While the government makes claims of maintaining security for events like the Olympics, the exile groups counter that the uneven emphasis on regions like Xinjiang, well away from the Olympics, are only justifications to crackdown on the Uyghurs and suppress their culture and religion. The conflict has continued, with deadly attacks occurring in

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[20] "70 Uighurs reportedly arrested," *Los Angeles Times,* April 4, 2008, http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/04/world/fg-briefs4.S1.

[21] "Guangdong toy factory brawl leaves 2 dead, 118 injured," China.org.cn.

[22] "Shaoguan, One Year On" Radio Free Asia, http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/shaoguan-06292010110913.html.

[23] Marianne Barriaux, "Three die during riots in China's Xinjiang region: state media," *The Sydney Morning Herald,* July 6, 2009, http://www.smh.com.au//breaking-news-world/three-die-during-riots-in-chinas-xinjiang-region-state-media-20090706-d9dz.html.

subsequent years.[24] And the government has in turn continued to take a hardline approach to the perceived Uyghur threat, including executions and imprisonment.[25]

The Uyghurs are far from the only ethnic minority in China. There are fifty-five recognized ethnic minorities, and even more unrecognized that live within the borders of China. There are two other ethnic groups in particular that can help explain the situation of the Uyghurs. The Tibetans and the Hui are both nationally significant ethnic minorities, and like the Uyghurs, they live on the edges of the country, far from Han cultural influence. Tibet was incorporated into China by force in the 1950s and 1960s, and actions by the Chinese government against the Tibetan people have provoked periodic violence with more recent events occurring around the same time as the unrest in Xinjiang.[26] The central political figure of Tibet, the Dalai Lama, has been in exile along with thousands of others Tibetans. A strong resistance to the Chinese government still exists; so much so that Tibetan Buddhist monks and civilians have self-immolated in protest of China's actions and violence.[27] Though the Uyghur and Tibetan movements differ, the Chinese government sees them both as threats.

Unlike the Uyghurs, Tibetans do not share a religious difference with the Han. Buddhism is practiced by a significant amount of the Chinese population and is not exclusionary with other Chinese religious traditions. Buddhism has a long and storied history in China, and while at times oppressed, it has become a part of China's culture. Still, there has been a significant interference upon Tibetan Buddhism by the Chinese government. In the 1990s, to exert control over Tibetans, the Chinese government imprisoned and then arbitrarily declared a successor for the Panchen Lama, one of the most important religious figures in Tibetan Buddhism.[28] When it comes to understanding their common

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[24] "15 Dead in Attack in West China's Xinjiang Region," *New York Times*, November 29, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2014/11/29/world/asia/ap-as-china-xinjiang-attack.html?_r=0.

[25] "China: eight sentenced to death over Xinjiang attacks," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/08/eight-sentenced-to-death-xinjiang-attacks-china.

[26] "Fire on the roof of the world" *The Economist*, March 14, 2008.

[27] "Self-immolations by Tibetans," International Campaign for Tibet, http://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/.

[28] "Panchen Lama," *Britannica Academic*, http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic440952/Panchen-Lama.

treatment, including animosity toward their religious beliefs, Tibetans share something more important with the Uyghurs: an active resistance to being a part of China. On the farthest edge of China's western frontier and cut off from the rest of the country by mountains and elevation, Tibet is a very isolated and distant place.[29] The Tibetan people seek to maintain their cultural differences from the Han Chinese and fear being colonized by the Chinese government. This fear feeds their resistance to the government and is exacerbated by the railroad construction that has increased Han migration into Tibet and decreased its isolation relative to the rest of China. This distance, unwillingness to conform, and resistance to control makes Tibet worrisome to the government, and it is in these issue that Tibet and Xinjiang share similarities.

To show further evidence that religion is not the biggest problem in Xinjiang one can look to the Hui. The Hui are a difficult people to categorize, as the government defines them largely as any Muslim communities that are not a part of another ethnic minority. The Hui also have no non-Chinese native language, and although they are inhabitants of the autonomous Hui province of Ningxia and surrounding provinces, they are spread widely around China, and their influence is enhanced by their involvement in business.[30] The Hui have had no religious restrictions placed upon them like the Uyghurs, who share their Muslim faith, and the Tibetans. The Hui have actually seen an increase in religious practice among their population and a greater connection with external Muslim influences from the Middle East and other predominantly Muslim regions.[31] What keeps the Hui from facing the same issues as the Uyghurs and Tibetans is that they are otherwise highly assimilated into mainline Chinese society. Their homeland is geographically more central in China, and their population dispersed widely throughout the country. The Hui have no resistance to the Chinese government and Ma Zhongying was responsible for crushing the first separatist attempts in Xinjiang as an ally of the Chinese government.

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[29] "Tibet activists target Nortel's annual meeting: company under fire for role in controversial railway," International Campaign for Tibet, http://www.savetibet.org/tibet-activists-target-nortels-annual-meeting-company-under-fire-for-role-in-controversial-railway/.

[30] Gladney, *Dislocating China*, 220.

[31] Hannah Beech, "If China Is Anti-Islam, Why Are These Chinese Muslims Enjoying a Faith Revival?" *Time,* August 12, 2014, http://time.com/3099950/china-muslim-hui-xinjiang-uighur-islam/.

These factors are ultimately more important to understanding China's interactions with ethnic minorities than any other single factor. Among the fifty-six minorities officially recognized by the government of China, most do not suffer the same problems as the Uyghurs and Tibetans. Geographic location, cultural assimilation, and peaceful co-existence ensure that most of the other minority ethnic groups are relatively free from conflict and persecution by the Chinese government. The fear of resistance movements is ultimately what makes the Chinese government act against the Uyghurs and Tibetans. Preventing and eliminating resistance to the government has long been one of the Chinese state's biggest concerns. This can be especially worrisome when resistance occurs along ethnic lines. Several factors drive the conflict between the Uyghurs and the Chinese government: the remoteness of Xinjiang, the distinct cultural differences between the Han majority and the Uyghur minority, and a long and storied history of resistance by the peoples of Xinjian. Without changes in policy or concerted efforts made by both the Uyghurs and the Chinese government, these tensions are likely to persist and continue the cyclical history of rebellion and oppression that has been ongoing in the region for centuries.