

Economic Development and Cultural Assimilation:

Exploring the Tensions in Xinjiang, China

Throughout its history, Xinjiang has been a region marked by constant conflict and tensions with the federal Chinese government. Situated in the northwest corner of China, Xinjiang is one of China's National Autonomous Regions and is home to many of China's ethnic minority groups, although it is primarily occupied by the Uyghur people. Although the structure of the Chinese government has changed over the course of the nation's history, resulting in changes in the legal status and rights of minority groups and National Autonomous Regions, the tensions between the Uyghur people and the central Chinese government have remained fairly constant, regardless of these shifts in policy. Stemming largely from conflicts between the local identity of Uyghur people and the collective national identity of China, these tensions have been manifested in the ways that the government regulates the use of Uyghur language and religion, among other cultural expressions. As a result, some Uyghur separatist groups have staged violent protests and outbreaks, leading the government to increase its already numerous restrictions on Uyghur cultural expression. Yet, while more recent government reforms have sought to uphold the cultural identities of ethnic minority groups, the new policies fall significantly short of resolving the present tensions. As these policies do not fully benefit the Uyghur people and aim to lead to a development that is typically manifested as assimilation into Han Chinese culture, the tensions between the Uyghur people and the Chinese federal government are unlikely to be resolved by current Chinese policies.

Although the Xinjiang region is considered to be a part of the People's Republic of China, the Uyghur people that inhabit it are a distinct ethnic group from the Han Chinese that compose the dominant ethnic group in China. While the Han people primarily speak Mandarin, a Sino-Tibetan language, the Uyghur people speak Uyghur, which belongs to the Turkic language family (Clothey & Koku, 2017). Additionally, the Uyghur people typically practice Islam, a

religion that is fairly uncommon across the rest of China (Davis, 2008). Over time, the attitude of the Chinese federal government towards such differences from the dominant Han culture has varied, ranging from extremely intolerant to actively seeking a pluralistic society. During the 1960s, the communist party in China adamantly opposed the local expression of cultural heritage in minority groups, seeing it as detrimental to the unity of the Chinese state, which led to the destruction of many cultural expressions of the Uyghur people, including limitations on their language, religion, and cultural dress (Davis, 2008). While more recent policy changes have attempted to restore some of these previously restricted freedoms, the historical limitations on Uyghur cultural identity have led to several separatist movements among the Uyghur people. Desiring to establish Xinjiang as an independent nation from China, several militant groups have arisen in recent years, attempting to free Xinjiang from Chinese control (Davis, 2008). However, rather than serving to achieve freedom, these outbreaks have instead led to increased restrictions on the Uyghur people, as the Chinese government believes it must respond to a military threat (Davis, 2008). Further compounding these conflicts, when the government has thus intervened to establish a firmer Chinese identity in the Xinjiang region, it has implemented policies designed to bring about development (Zenz, 2014). However, rather than finding the specific areas that Uyghurs believe need improvement, the government has determined that development is solely evidenced by increased economic output and has therefore implemented policies designed to increase the economic production of Xinjiang (Zenz, 2014). In this way, these policies have perpetuated the conflicts between the Uyghur people and the federal Chinese government because Uyghur needs have been ignored when these policies have been established.

In response to the consequent dissatisfaction expressed by the Uyghur people, the central Chinese government has altered its policies in order to give minority groups a more secure right

to cultural expression. To this end, the 1984 constitution of the People's Republic of China includes several clauses that seem to grant these groups more freedom to use their own language, participate in local government, and practice their own religion (Potter, 2005; Wu, 2014). However, while this constitution seemed to hold promise for ethnic minorities, it has been ineffectively implemented, thus failing to accomplish its goals and satisfy minority groups (Potter, 2005; Zenz, 2014). One prominent factor leading to this failure is that the religious and linguistic freedoms granted in the constitution are only to be implemented if they serve to perpetuate the philosophy of socialism (Potter, 2005; Zenz, 2014). The People's Republic of China is a socialist state, and as such, the government has sought to unify all regions of the country under a common socialist philosophy, therefore mandating that linguistic and religious expressions must reinforce this belief in socialism. This contingency allows the local government in Xinjiang to restrict activities, such as Muslim worship practices, that it views to be oppositional to socialism (Potter, 2005). Additionally, the effects of the provisions for Uyghur people have been weakened by the influx of Han migrants into areas that were historically populated by Uyghur people. This influx has served to dilute the concentration of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, decreasing their representation in local government and reducing the potency of laws created to protect the rights of minority groups when they are centered in a specific area (Potter, 2005). Simultaneously, as Han presence has increased in areas that were traditionally inhabited by Uyghurs, the Han people have experienced more of the benefits of development in these areas, receiving better jobs and more government positions (Wu, 2014). In these ways, the attempts by the Chinese government to support the Uyghur people residing in Xinjiang have not benefitted the Uyghurs as they have failed to address the root of the problem but instead have benefitted Han people living in Xinjiang rather than the Uyghurs.

One manifestation of these shortcomings of Chinese policies to satisfactorily address the tensions present between Uyghurs and the central Chinese government is the way that the government addresses Uyghur religion. Most Uyghur people are Muslim, a religion that is fairly uncommon throughout the rest of China (Clothey & Koku, 2017). As Islam is not seen to adhere to socialist values and ideologies, the religious practices of the Uyghurs are severely restricted to serve the stated purpose of maintaining the national unity of China (Potter, 2005). To this end, laws have been implemented in Xinjiang specifying where Islam can be practiced and who can practice it. For instance, religious leaders must fit certain political criteria set by the state, and minors are not allowed to take part in religious activities (Clothey & Koku, 2017). While many Uyghurs argue that these laws violate their right to practice their religion, the Chinese government justifies them as ways to protect national safety. In the past, some groups of Islamic extremists have staged violent outbreaks in Xinjiang, leading the government to increase security and regulations around the religious practices of Uyghurs, attempting to prevent any further violence from occurring (Davis, 2008). However, in spite of the numerous obstacles prohibiting the Uyghur people from the full practice of their religion, many Uyghurs have found solidarity and encouragement in their faith through the use of Internet chat groups, referencing the Koran or religious stories when writing to each other (Clothey & Koku, 2017). Thus, although the government has limited the ways in which Uyghur people can practice Islam, they have managed to maintain their religion as a part of their cultural identity.

In a similar fashion, the central Chinese government has attempted to limit Uyghur people's expression of their cultural identity by regulating the use of their language. As language is an expression of identity, the forced shift from Uyghur to Mandarin has been viewed by some people as a direct strategy for forcing Uyghurs to assimilate to the dominant Han culture.

However, both the central Chinese government and the local government in Xinjiang have made efforts to compromise between Chinese unity and plurality by instating a bilingual education policy (Teng, 2001). Through this policy, schools in Xinjiang conduct education in both Mandarin and the local vernacular language, which is typically Uyghur. Yet, while this policy seemed to strike an appealing compromise between the interests of the Chinese state and those of the Uyghur people, its implementation has created increasing disparities between Uyghur and Han culture by creating a language ideology in which Mandarin is associated with more success and wealth than Uyghur is. By using Mandarin to teach subjects that are viewed as more beneficial in finding and attaining employment, such as math and science, while teaching others in local languages, the education system has begun to portray Mandarin as a language of success, which has consequently decreased the appeal of speaking local minority languages (Zenz, 2014). Additionally, when universities teach Mandarin to students whose first language is that of a minority group, teachers also tend to emphasize socialist values, thereby facilitating assimilation into the predominant Han culture (Zenz, 2014). While this educational policy has led to a decreasing number of people, especially children, speaking Uyghur in Xinjiang, many Uyghur people have resisted the destruction of their language by establishing online chat groups in which they practice the Uyghur language in order to preserve their cultural authenticity (Clothey & Koku, 2017). However, although this drive to maintain the integrity of the Uyghur language has helped to preserve Uyghur culture, it has potentially put the Uyghur people at an economic disadvantage. According to research by Tang, Hu, and Jin (2016), even when education levels are controlled, Uyghur people get less prestigious and poorer paying jobs because they are less proficient in Mandarin. This is evidenced by the fact that vast numbers of Uyghur people work in agriculture, instead of skilled labor, despite the increasing urbanization of Xinjiang (Fischer,

2013). In this way, the conflict between Uyghur people and the government about the language in which Uyghur children should be educated is indicative of a much larger struggle between economic development and cultural preservation in Xinjiang.

Due to the significant contrasts between socialist Chinese society and Uyghur culture, tensions have existed between the two groups throughout the majority of China's history. While the Chinese government's current policies on the National Autonomous Region of Xinjiang appear to be more tolerant than some of the highly restrictive policies employed by past political parties in China, they are still inadequate to resolve the conflicts between the Uyghur people and the federal government, as the policies better benefit Han migrants than Uyghur people. Additionally, policies that enable Uyghurs to preserve their cultural identity through the practice of religion and use of language are contingent upon these practices upholding Chinese socialist ideals. Thus, rather than enabling the Uyghur people to maintain their cultural integrity, these policies have instead served to assimilate the Uyghur people into the dominant Han culture. In the name of unity and development, the Chinese government has begun to destroy the cultural expressions that form the core of Uyghur identity. Furthermore, the economic advances that the government has sought to produce in Xinjiang are not necessarily synonymous with development, as they have led to greater levels of civil unrest and discontent. Accordingly, it can be seen that development is not necessarily best measured in terms of economic advancement, but that many other factors hold positions of importance when determining if a region is improving. If these other factors were considered by the Chinese government in determining how best to interact with the Xinjiang region, it might be possible to peacefully resolve the present tensions. However, this peaceful resolution will never be accomplished with the present policies of assimilation and forced economic development.

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