Xinjiang: China's 'other Tibet'

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Xinjiang's Uighur population are culturally more Turkic than Chinese

While reports of unrest in Tibet frequently grab headlines around the world, little attention is given to what several human rights groups have dubbed China's "other Tibet".

China's frontier to Central Asia, the vast western region of Xinjiang has in recent years seen escalating ethnic tensions and the imposition of a heavy military presence to suppress what Beijing says is a growing terrorist threat.

Covering an area more than three times the size of France, Xinjiang has long been an important crossroads of trade and culture.

For centuries its oasis towns were essential stopping points along the legendary Silk Road – a history that has left Xinjiang with a unique cultural legacy.

The region's indigenous population are the Uighurs - Muslims who are ethnically, linguistically and culturally Turkic, and worlds apart from their Han rulers, the ethnicity which dominates the rest of China.

After a chequered history with the Chinese Empire, Xinjiang's present incarnation as an officially "autonomous region" within the People's Republic of China began in 1949.

From Beijing's point of view, Xinjiang has always been a part of China.

But while the region has a history of domination at the hands of the Chinese, Beijing's claim overlooks long gaps where the region merged with Central Asian and Turkic states.

To this day, most Uighurs feel more culturally aligned with the Turkic peoples to the west, rather than Beijing to the east.

Conversely, and almost without exception, Han Chinese feel China's control of the region is perfectly legitimate.

Xinjiang's culture is rooted in its history as a key junction on the Silk Road

'Chinese' Xinjiang

"I've talked to a lot of people in China about it and they just don't question it," says Michael Dillon, author of Xinjiang: China's Muslim Far Northwest.

"It's always presented as Zhongguo Xinjiang [Chinese Xinjiang] like Tibet is Zhongguo Xizang [Chinese Tibet] and so the assumption is that it's always been part of China."

The region is of value to China due to "a very complicated mixture of political, economic and psychological reasons," says Dillon.

Among these, he says, are Xinjiang's bountiful natural resources and raw materials, and its strategic position buffering China from Russia.

But he adds, there is also the idea that "if Beijing doesn't retain Xinjiang, it's a question of losing face, because Xinjiang is part of the motherland."

On top of that, Xinjiang also boasts something clearly lacking in the rest of China - space.

Accounting for one sixth of China's total area, Xinjiang not only produces 30 per cent of China's cotton, but between the 1960s and mid-1990s it was also used as the test site for China's nuclear weapons.

Perhaps most unpopular with the Uighurs though is the use of their land to resettle huge numbers of Han from the overpopulated east of China.

Critics say few Uighurs are benefiting from Xinjiang's development

Settlers rising

The numbers of ethnic Han settlers in Xinjiang has risen from well under half a million in 1953 to 7.5 million by 2000, and is rising fast.

According to the latest available figures, Han settlers make up around 42 per cent of Xinjiang's total population of 18 million, dictating a life that is culturally alien to the native Uighurs.

"There are more and more Han arriving here all the time," explains Tursuntay, a 45-year old Uighur man from the Xiniang border city of Ily.

"When I was young there were very few – this place belonged to us."

Hislat, a 22-year old Uighur woman from Urumqi, the Han-dominated capital of Xinjiang, is also feeling the squeeze.

"Before, looking for work was easy, but now they all want Han people, they don't want us," she says.

"It's really difficult, but there's nothing we can do about it."

Arienne Dwyer, Assistant Professor of Linguistic Anthropology at the University of Kansas believes the situation in Xinjiang has got worse over the last decade.

"In the eighties and early nineties we saw quite a lot of Uighurs, particularly intellectuals and those in the northern area, who felt that the Chinese project in Xinjiang, though very far from perfect, was OK," she says.

"One thing that people of any ethnic group in Xinjiang would agree on with the central government is that economic development is a good thing. This is one change that has continued and has been a positive force all around."

However, what has followed says Dwyer are increasingly Han-focused policies where cultural activities are more tightly constrained and there is a stronger effort to bring ethnic minorities, particularly on the periphery such as Xinjiang, "into the Chinese fold".

This cultural tightening accelerated rapidly after the late 1990s and was characterised by increased police action, suppression of unrest and changes in language policy, increasing the use of Mandarin in schools at the expense of the Uighur language.

"From the point of view of the government, this is because Uighur pupils and university students don't have the adequate Chinese language skills to be competitive in the market economy," says Dwyer.

"But from the point of view of the Uighurs, this is a bold-faced attempt to be assimilated and it has not been viewed favourably."

Disillusioned, angry

This is causing many Uighurs to feel disillusioned, angry and afraid of losing their distinctive

culture says Dwyer, and as a result many, especially Uighur youths, are becoming more religious than their parents and a growing trend to study Arabic.

Dwyer does not believe claims from some Chinese officials that there is any connection with a radical Islamist movement.

Instead she sees such moves as "a statement of Uighur identity, to say 'we are fundamentally different from the Han Chinese'".

For Urumqi resident Hislat, religion is the root of her dissimilarities with the Han.

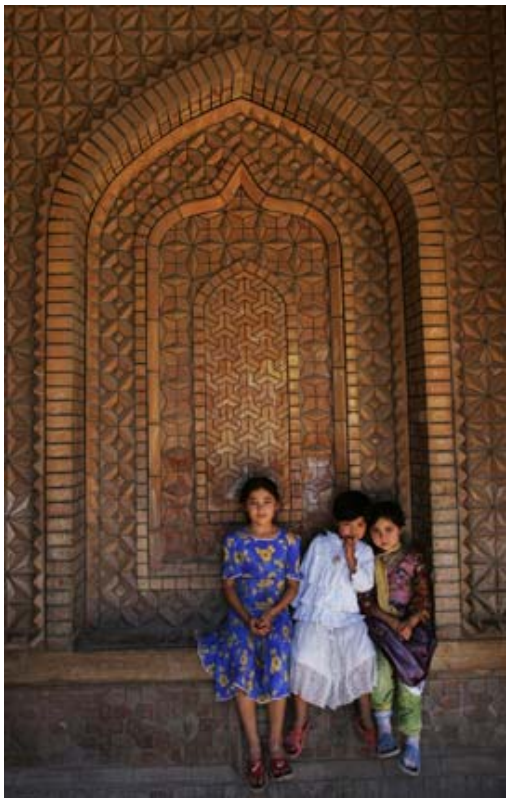
"We are very different from Han people," she says.

"They don't believe in anything, they have no religion. We only eat Halal foods, but they don't worry about that, they can eat anything. Also they don't pray, they don't know how. They don't believe."

Although assertive about their identities as Uighurs and as Muslims, Hislat says she and her peers are in no fear of being radicalised.

Their culture and traditions are important to them, but they are living in a Han-dominated city and their lifestyles are accordingly secular.

They love American pop-stars, playing on the internet, going to discos and are prepared to be pragmatic with prayers in order to fit in with their work or study schedules.



Xinjiang's indigenous Muslims face tight controls on their culture

But in the border cities Kashgar, Aksu and Ily, the atmosphere is different, with a much stronger military presence and more attempts by the government to control political activity and the Imams in the mosques.

Beijing says the security presence is needed to meet the challenge of separatist movements and conflicts which have plagued Xinjiang since its annexation.

These activities peaked in the 1990s, the time that the Soviet Union was breaking up.

At the time "the old Muslim states of Central Asia, like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were all becoming independent states," says author Michael Dillon, "and there was a strong feeling among certain parts of the Uighur population that they ought to have their own Uighuristan or Eastern Turkistan.'

More recently that sentiment in Xinjiang has subsided - or been suppressed.

Whether that is as a result of government measures, or a lack of reporting in the Chinese media is difficult to tell.

According to Dillon, it is a result of China's clever use of economic and diplomatic measures to dissuade its Central Asian neighbours from helping Xinjiang gain independence.

"I think this is one of the reasons that things have quietened down," he says. "The Uighurs have got no real external support."

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