

# *Muslim Revival: A “Peaceful Protest” of the Uygurs in Xinjiang*

---

*Sergio Ticozzi, PIME*

In a November 2007 article in the *Journal of Contemporary China*, Joanne Smith Finley synthesizes the role of the recent revival of Islamic religious practice in the life and community of the Uygur people in Xinjiang in the following five ways. It is:

1. a means of symbolic resistance against perceived oppression of Muslims (on a national and/or global level);
2. a response to failed development and an identification with Islam’s egalitarian ethos;
3. a return to religious and cultural ‘purity’;
4. a source of spatial and psychological escapism; and
5. a vehicle for personal and national reform and salvation.”<sup>1</sup>

The first role, that is, the Muslim revival as a “symbolic resistance against perceived oppression,” which for some Uygurs is limited to their own region, but for some others refers to the situation of Muslims worldwide, deserves special consideration. The present paper wants to put this renewal of devotion to the Islamic religion of the majority of Uygurs in the social context of the official Chinese policy towards the ethnic minorities, and of the particular situation of the Uygur ethnic group in Xinjiang.

## **Context of the Official Policy for the Ethnic Minorities**

In China there are over 100 million members of ethnic

---

<sup>1</sup> Joanne Smith Finley, “Chinese Oppression in Xinjiang, Middle Eastern Conflicts and Global Islamic Solidarities among the Uygurs”, in *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 16, No. 53, November 2007, pp. 639-640.

minorities, who make up the majority population in several inland areas. The PRC Constitution sets out the fundamental principle of equality of all nationalities and of non-discrimination, while, at the same time, issuing a prohibition against secessionist tendencies:

All nationalities in the People's Republic of China are equal. The State protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops the relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China's nationalities. Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality are prohibited; and any act that undermines the unity of the nationalities or instigates their secession is prohibited. (art. 4).

Articles 117–119 provide autonomous governments authority over a variety of areas including culture, economic development, education, finance, public health, and science.

Echoing the PRC Constitution, the 1984 Law of the PRC on Regional National Autonomy prohibits discrimination against and oppression of any nationality, but the same Article also prohibits acts undermining the unity of all nationalities or instigating national division.

In May 2005, the State Council issued provisions, specifying further plans to promote sustainable development and poverty relief in ethnic minority areas. It set forth a specific implementation of large-scale development projects of the Western regions (the 'Great Development of the West, *xibu dakaiifa* 西部大開發), preferential taxation and financial policies to increase aid to national autonomous areas, including public funds for compulsory and higher education, measures for employment and social security, as well as for cultural, health, language and religious issues.

But there were strong challenges to and obstacles against the implementation of all these laws and measures. The practical implementation of the state directives seems to fail to provide institutional protection or to guarantee preservation of the minorities' rights and unique cultures, including language and

religions. Obstacles include: gaps between central policies and local decisions, lack of a legal definition of 'discrimination', and a lack of systematic and effective monitoring and assessment of the implementation of the laws.

All these factors leave room for arbitrary application and even neglect of the law, which, consequently, increases the discontent of the population. The resulting disorder becomes the official justification for adopting a 'strike-hard' (*yanda* 嚴打) policy. The 'good reasons' the authorities give for this are: the need for unity against any tendency towards independence, the fight against terrorism, especially after the World Trade Center Towers tragedy of September 11, 2001, and the need for security and social order in view of the August 2008 Olympics.

According to a recent human rights report:

China continues to use both its status as a 'developing' country and the justification of 'war on terror' to deter critics of its human rights policies. Both provide a smokescreen for:

- Ongoing exclusion from political participation: minorities are unable to exercise any significant legislative or administrative powers...
- Inequitable development strategies: oil and gas are piped away from autonomous regions to fuel Beijing, Shanghai and other coastal cities. Benefits are rarely reinvested in local health and education. Further, as the autonomous areas have been developed, they have been increasingly militarized. While this allows China to defend its international borders, it also acts as internal intimidation against 'insurgents'. Finally, as Han Chinese migrate to the urban centers of autonomous regions, they are favored for jobs and bank loans.
- Lack of protection of minority cultural identity: such expressions, particularly of religious identity, are often taken as examples of political separatism which can incur violent punishment. The education system is

implemented in a way that denies Mongolian, Tibetan and Uyghur children the opportunity and ability to learn their own histories and languages, and to practice their religions and cultures...<sup>2</sup>

### **The Present Situation among Uyghurs in Xinjiang**

The official "China.org.cn" provides the most recent statistics on the population of Xinjiang province. According to statistics in 2005, the population in Xinjiang numbered 20,100,000 of which 12,100,000 were people with ethnic backgrounds (from 47 distinct groups), or about 60% of the total. Of all the ethnic groups, the Uyghurs were by far the largest, numbering about 9 million or 45% of the total population of the province. Hans numbered about 8 million, or about 40%.

Xinjiang region depends on oasis irrigation agriculture. Agriculture accounts for about 30% of the regional economy. It relies upon melted snow water from the surrounding mountains to irrigate its oases, which are isolated, and separated from each other by large expanses of desert. Transportation is poor and expensive. As a result many areas are basically closed economies. Increasing population in the oases has put great pressure on water resources, leading to a loss of vegetation on the fringes of the oases, an acceleration of desertification and a deterioration of the grasslands. Of the 20 counties of Xinjiang in which the ethnic Uyghur population makes up 90% or more of the population, the government has designated 13 of them as key poverty counties.

### **Uyghur Reaction to Official Policy towards the Minorities**

In the 1980s, after the launch of the liberalization and reform policies of Deng Xiaoping, the official policy was rather tolerant,

---

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights in China (HRIC), April 25, 2007, "CHINA: Minority, Exclusion, Marginalization and Rising Tensions" (MGRChinaReport.pdf).

and the protests that took place in Xinjiang were mainly concerned with the protection of Islam and Islamic culture.

In 1991, following the start of the Gulf War, there was an increase of protests and disturbances in Urumqi and other cities in support of Saddam Hussein, and in protest against a lack of religious freedom. In March 1992, the police dispersed a large demonstration in Kashgar demanding greater rights and local autonomy. In July 1995, the arrest of some imams in Khotan led to large demonstrations. In mid-1996, Beijing launched a 'strike hard (*yanda*)' campaign. The official prohibition of a '*mashrep*' gathering, a meeting for regulating moral, religious and social behavior of youth and forming male peer groups, resulted in riots (5-10 February 1997).<sup>3</sup> On February 5, 1997, between ten and fifteen thousand Uygurs, mostly young men, took to the streets of Ghulja, and marched to the municipal government offices. They were demanding equal treatment, religious freedom, and an end to racial discrimination in response to ever more repressive policies and practices against the majority Uygur community. A soccer tournament was also cancelled. The authorities parked tanks on the soccer fields in Ghulja, claiming the space was needed for military exercises, and broadcasting that the games would have been "illegal gatherings". Thousands of Uygurs took to the streets of Ghulja. The Chinese authorities sent fully armed paramilitary police to confront the unarmed demonstrators with batons, tear gas and high-pressure water cannons. The police fired indiscriminately into the crowd, killing as many as 30 Uygur demonstrators and wounding more than 100. Then, the police rounded up the fleeing demonstrators, loaded them on to military trucks, and took them to different detention facilities. A hard crackdown on 'illegal religion' and separatism followed. Thousands of Uygurs were detained; dozens and even hundreds were executed (Amnesty International says 200),

---

<sup>3</sup> Taken from "Ghulja, Xinjiang 1997 Riots: A Watershed" in China Letter – News and Human Rights, February 11, 2004, at [www.alumni.net/Asia/China/Xinjiang/Ghulja](http://www.alumni.net/Asia/China/Xinjiang/Ghulja)).

some in public, following summary trials, and many others were sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Others simply disappeared.

After this incident, the Chinese Government moved quickly to consolidate its program of internal colonization, through the 'Great Development of the West' program and the policy of promoting further Han immigration in order to alter the composition of the population, as well as other means to retain the loyalty of people.

Most scholars seem to agree that the Ghulja/Yining incident constituted a turning point in the recent history of Xinjiang, after which Uygur dissent in the region was practically silenced, not only in public, but also in private contexts. But how are we to interpret this silence?<sup>4</sup>

### **The Peaceful Opposition of Uygurs in Xinjiang**

Although some violent acts of resistance have taken place against the Chinese authorities, the majority of Uygurs express their opposition through non-violent demonstrations and initiatives. Among the peaceful means adopted, the most meaningful seems to be the revival of the Muslim religion. The Uygurs want to underline their own identity, to differentiate themselves from the Han Chinese, by binding themselves to the Muslim community, both local and international. At present, Islam is indeed increasingly assuming an important function in Uygur social and cultural life, and in the individual psyche, as well as in the political consciousness of many individuals.

The revival started from South Xinjiang in the early 1990s, and gradually spread to the northern areas. A report of the Academy of Social Sciences in 1991, speaks about a 'religious fever' in the southern areas of Xinjiang. This was attributed to several causes:

---

<sup>4</sup> Nimrod Baranovitch, "From Resistance to Adaptation: Uygur Popular Music and Changing Attitudes among Uygur Youth?", in *The China Journal*, No. 58, July 2007, p. 60.

the fast rapid building of mosques, an increase of mosque schools and the study of the Koran, the large number of party cadres and teachers practicing religion, the social prestige of the religious leaders, and the force of the tradition.<sup>5</sup> After 1989, the influence of the broad religious resurgence in the independent Central Asian republics, especially among ethnic groups, who also have a presence in China (Uygurs, Uzbeks, Kazaks), as a reaction to the oppression of Soviet rule, gave a new momentum to the Xinjiang 'religious fever'. Another important factor seems to have been the efforts, both financial and ideological, of experts coming from Arab countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, to spread more traditional and stricter Muslim practices. During the 1990s there was an increased presence of Arab experts and of transnational contacts (pilgrimages to Mecca), as well as greater access to scriptural traditions and printed material, and to world information and media coverage of Muslim issues. Thus the local people could see their own problematic situation in the international perspective of the overall Muslim world.

Practically the religious revival was manifested in a greater faithfulness to the five times daily prayer, and to participation in Friday worship, to an increase in alms-giving for charity, in the building of new and larger mosques (with financial help from the Government), and in the solemn celebration of the traditional feasts.

Local Muslims perceive both the meaning and the limits of this religious renewal.

Individuals display different levels of awareness towards the process, a point highlighted by Tashmamat, an intellectual in his forties originally from Qashqar:

'For many people going to the mosque now, it is a superficial manifestation. These middle school kids who are going to the mosque on Fridays — do not have a deep commitment or

---

<sup>5</sup> Reported by Social Science Research in Xinjiang, no. 226, 2-1991.

understanding. They are in fact expressing their discontent with the current state of society. Perhaps "opposition" is too strong a word and certainly many don't realize that what they are doing is a kind of symbolic opposition.'

A male restaurateur in his forties, originally from Qashqar, explained:

'I suppose Islam is stronger now because the government is trying to block religious activity. If the government tries to block or limit Islam, then people's faith only becomes stronger.'<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the suppression or limitation of religious freedom in Xinjiang, as elsewhere, has the paradoxical effect of strengthening the central role of Islam in Uygur life. Under external oppression, the loyalty to one's traditional religion expresses the pent-up growing discontent at the ill-treatment and injustices suffered, as well as at the widening socio-economic inequalities between Uygurs and Han migrants. The allegiance to Islam as a 'pure' alternative to the cultural 'impurity' and moral permissiveness brought in by secular education and Han modernization, emphasizes the difference between the two groups. Moreover, oppression and social change lead to a strong sense of insecurity among people. They seek and find psychological support in the communion and solidarity of the mosque community. At the same time, their attendance at services in an exclusively Islamic place underlines a deep desire for spatial segregation from Han migrants, who seem to be encroaching more and more on former Uygur space.

These are the lessons to be learned from the Muslim revival in Xinjiang. Hopefully the Chinese authorities will learn from them, and take them as the legitimate aspirations of a people fast becoming strangers in their own land.

---

<sup>6</sup> Joanne Smith Finley, art. cit., pp. 640, 642.