

Morris ROSSABI¹: *China and the Uyghurs: A Concise Introduction*

*Reviewed by Norbert FRANCIS**

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An account of the history of the Uyghur people is indispensable for understanding the current crisis in Xinjiang province. This is where *China and the Uyghurs* begins. As a historian of East Asia, Professor Rossabi approaches the problem of understanding by applying an objective procedure of fact-finding, as is required of researchers in his field. Objective, here, first implies the gathering of evidence and other reliable information from historical sources and from reports of events, also from reliable sources, as they unfold in real time. Secondly, it implies examining the available information critically, from more than one point of view. Such an approach to history and current affairs is sometimes also called “balanced”. The balanced assessment is sometimes difficult when our knowledge of unfolding events suggests that the problem in large part is one of rights violations on a monumental scale. For this reason, some readers may question or even reject the method of this study. Upon skimming the chapters, before reading them closely, I admit to also having been initially predisposed along the same lines.

This review will take the Preface and each chapter in turn, following events more or less chronologically. Being how the book is organized, this will allow us to trace the controversies back to their origin in time.

What came to be designated officially in 1955 by the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), comprised the same territory claimed by the Republic of China, the civil war-torn and largely foreign-occupied republic that emerged from the 1911 Xinhai Revolution overthrowing the almost five thousand years of dynastic rule. The last dynasty, the

¹ Morris ROSSABI, Associate Adjunct Professor, Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, Columbia University.
Email address: mr63@columbia.edu

* Norbert FRANCIS, Professor Emeritus, Northern Arizona University.
Email address: norbert.francis@nau.edu



Qing (1644–1911), had also claimed Xinjiang, sovereignty which the republican government carried forward (again, it is important to remember that it barely controlled significant swaths of Eastern China, much less the western provinces). By the mid-18th century, it could be argued that the Qing had in fact administered the region, having expanded into Tibet as well.

Chapter 1 begins with the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). The Silk Roads, ancient antecedents to the Belt and Road Initiative of today, wound through the Northwest territories connecting the Tang capital, Chang’an (Xi’an), and Central Asia, and beyond. The Tang (618–907) promoted the growing commerce, but despite some incursions it would be wrong to assert that control over the towns and countryside of the northwest was achieved. The chapter emphasizes that the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) current official history on this question—that Xinjiang was “part of China” beginning with the Han dynasty—is misleading at best. In fact, following the collapse of the Tang dynasty, during the period of the Mongol Khanates, the northwest region was effectively independent of Beijing, coinciding with the displacing of Buddhism by Islam. Following the Mongol era, it could not be claimed that Xinjiang was a unified entity either, but the most accurate characterization of the relationship with the East, prior to the actual Qing conquest, is that of “sporadic influence” over essentially self-ruling domains (p. 11).

If effective Chinese sovereignty is established in the mid-1700s, considerable autonomy still prevailed with an attempt to maintain coexistence and promote economic development.

As the last dynasty began to enter its final decline, the relative coexistence also began to come apart. In this context the confrontation with Russian interests becomes a serious issue of interference, continuing to complicate the question of sovereignty well into the 20th century, including the post-1949 years. Up through the 1960s, during the Sino-Soviet split, support for pro-independence forces continued from the USSR. This interesting topic is the focus of Chapter 2. The widespread confusion and generalized disintegration of the republican era gave way to new uprisings. In 1933, the first short-lived East Turkistan Islamic Republic was proclaimed, with initial support from the Soviets, soon to be withdrawn. The second Soviet satellite state, the East Turkistan Republic (1944–1949), deserves a major study all its own to then trace the many years of interaction and competition between Russia/USSR and China, spanning the pre- and post-revolutionary periods of both countries. Needless to say, the recent historical example of an autonomous Uyghur state (albeit foreign sponsored) keeps the idea of an actual separation and independence from China alive, a precedent/idea that no other national minority of China has ever or could ever have plausibly contemplated.

The early CCP posture toward the peoples of Xinjiang presented a semblance of tolerance and gradual transition. Conflict was restricted to land reform measures that, as in Tibet, affected the vast properties owned by the religious institutions. The *bingtuan* (兵團), a military corps established in 1954 that served as a militia and production brigade, grew to a formidable force, later to be implicated in involuntary population transfers and management of the internment camps. But throughout these first years following the Chinese Revolution, economic development and reform appeared to advance without major friction or misunderstanding.

It was the sharp left-turn of 1957, prelude to the hecatomb of the Great Leap Forward, that we can perhaps point to as the beginning of the end of the more or less tense but relatively stable coexistence. The chaos reached up into the Party leadership, prompting it to assign blame. The new adversary was the peoples' religion itself (p. 54), their beliefs and customs. State policy now included the prohibition of pilgrimages and the supervision of mosques and shrines (p. 54). Islam itself came to be seen as an obstacle to progress, in line with the Party's anti-religion doctrine that it imposed in all cases across the PRC. The shift to a hardline in the context of the Great Leap Forward triggered an exodus in both Xinjiang (mainly Kazaks to the USSR) and Tibet (the Dalai Lama and his followers to India). In both regions, the initial response from Beijing was to deepen the conflict until the CCP leadership could temporarily sideline Mao. For a few years, until 1966, a more moderate faction in the Central Committee was able to draw back from the famine and confrontation in Xinjiang, as elsewhere. The four-year relaxation on ideology-driven directives resulted in fewer restrictions on Islam and an economic recovery.

We now arrive at the point in history that fully corresponds to the living memory of today's citizens of China. The Red Guards renewed the campaign against religion and worked to uproot the "capitalist roader" reforms that the moderates had implemented a few years earlier, hoping to head off a free-fall over the cliff. As in Tibet, the widespread physical destruction of places of worship, schools, shrines and religious texts for the three years through to 1969 (p. 69), and continuing albeit with abated enthusiasm until 1976 with the death of the tyrant, remains today as the reference point in recent times for practicing Muslims of Xinjiang and all those who identify with the faith. Thus, it should come as no surprise that today any arbitrary measure even approximating the last major assault on religion, along with the associated sharp rise in Han immigration, has provoked strong resistance.

This is where Chapter 3 picks up the historical account. Here, the question is posed: why even after economic recovery and unprecedented material progress, spanning a period from the late 1970s into the second decade of the 21st century,

has discontent and repeated outbreaks of serious organized violence persisted? The specific kinds of confrontation, in their recurring frequency, have not been previously attested, and as an interesting contrast to Tibet and other autonomous regions, which can be taken as parallel scenarios of conflict, such incidents appear to be specific to the Xinjiang conflict. The reform and opening-up of Deng Xiaoping was implemented along with attempts at some measure of liberalization and greater religious and cultural tolerance, as on previous occasions (p. 75). Up until Tiananmen, opposition and protest seemed to be more or less predictable, and from the point of view of the centre, seemed manageable. However, the following year, 1990, all this appeared to change.

With regard to the above mentioned historical parallel between the XUAR and Tibet (Liu Xiaoyuan 2020), it is important to step back and trace the relationship as it has evolved since 1949. In both cases, when it came to the problem of integrating the minority nationalities, the stage of an initial posture of flexibility and gradualism soon gave way to strike-hard reaction. Across China, such flexibility and gradualism was even more fleeting, with the first violent purges of the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries occurring in 1950 and Anti-Rightist Rectification in the second half of the decade, followed by the waves of Maoist radicalism of the Great Leap Forward beginning in 1958 and the 1960s-1970s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (Yang 2021). After a brief period of dialogue and negotiation, the fanaticism and devastation that was visited upon Tibet and Xinjiang were the same that the Chinese people as whole endured, with the difference that the respective cultural institutions associated with Buddhism and Islam suffered an additional repression, specific to culture and religion.

Language policy in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and XUAR, which has swung back and forth between an attempted recognition of inclusion and an exclusionary imposition of Chinese, followed the same directives, from one period to the next, from Beijing. The respective dates for each change in policy in Tibet and Xinjiang largely coincide. In any educational system of a multilingual society, unless a dedicated portion of the teaching program is reserved for using the minority language in learning academic content (e.g. Uyghur-language or Tibetan-language as the medium of instruction), the dominant national language (in this case Chinese) will eventually displace it almost completely in the younger generation, in society, not just in school. The question is not the teaching of Chinese *per se*, but the down-grading of Uyghur and Tibetan from media of instruction to subjects, then potentially reducing them to minimal expression.

The remaining sections of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 focus on the period of armed actions organized by what other observers have characterized as a loose

confederation of groups—estimated at approximately 26, a number with ties to international terrorist networks (p. 93), and the PRC’s response. The author deserves credit for not avoiding discussion of this difficult topic, an important aspect of the present crisis. Readers can consult the details of the incidents beginning in 1990, culminating in 2014 (pp. 77–124), and subsiding in recent years.

The fundamental error of the PRC response, as other experts have called attention to, is the failure to differentiate between violent fundamentalism and peaceful everyday religious practice and affiliation. Confounding the two, in the case of Xinjiang, has seen the emergence of what, by all accounts, seems to be population-level collective punishment on a level with cases seen in the 20th century.

Chapter 4 takes up the question of the camps. The available evidence points to a decision of the security forces to impose a regime of mass internment that stands as one of the most serious violations of human rights since the Maoist era ended in 1976. This decision has counted upon the full support of the PRC and CCP central leadership from the beginning. It appears, from the testimony of former internees and reporters, as a full-fledged if not more aggressive revival of the *laogai* (勞改) and *laojiao* (勞教) penal systems, specifically targeting in this case one of the minority peoples of China. The internment system, of the same design as the Soviet gulag, turns out to be effectively indiscriminate, detaining for the most part completely innocent individuals. This conclusion can be inferred straightforwardly from the estimated number of recent and current detainees. As Chapter 4 points out, the challenge for democracy and human rights proponents continues to be the iron-clad secrecy that has been maintained by the authorities, frustrating any objective investigation. The control of information is on the same level as the lockdown of evidence related to the origin of COVID-19 and the massive application of the death penalty (the latter especially relevant to this review).

The inexorable and accelerating migration of Han Chinese into the autonomous region, now spanning over almost 100 years, is the central point of conflict. It is the overriding factor around which turn virtually all sources of the conflict and all down-stream consequences driving the conflict deeper. Previous regimes going back to the Qing dynasty had encouraged migration, but few workers, much less their families, took up the offer. During the first years of PRC rule, immigrants from Eastern China represented 6% of the population, in 1963, 33%, today 42%. In the north, the urban centres that cluster around Urumqi are majority Han, in the capital itself at a proportion of over 70%. According to the 2020 Census, Uyghurs are now a minority in the XUAR, at 45% (down from 75% in 1953 and 54% in 1963).

Intermarriage, in part a natural outcome of this demographic shift, is largely the result of deliberate PRC policy. As the author points out, this trend is more

complex than appears at first glance. Similar to other traditional societies, and again as in Tibet, modernization, economic development, full-time employment outside the home, new educational opportunities, including in higher education, for girls and young women, have created new options of social life that were unthinkable in the recent past. For obvious reasons, a return to the traditional norms of courtship and marriage is no longer an option at this point.

The thesis of this study suggests a number of implications. One that this reader has taken away, that appears consistent with the facts summarized by the author, is the following.

If under the current conditions of strong nation-level integration, sustainable for the distant foreseeable future, there is no viable or even conceivable pathway to independence—an assessment by the way that also applies to Tibet and Hong Kong (Yu and Kwan 2020)—this consideration should be central in formulating an effective political program for eventual reform. The historical lessons (of hundreds of years) of the different variants of limited or *de facto* autonomy that came to be (partially) implemented could guide the democratic movements going forward, on the example of Charter 08, for example. In fact, the most recent proposal of autonomy was made during the 20th century immediately following 1949, by the very same CCP, under Mao, as it attempted to negotiate with Tibet and Xinjiang a “transition” (“long-term” and “gradual” by its own characterization) toward the PRC model (see Chapter 2; Liu Xiaobo 2020). The transition and negotiation collapsed with military occupation and total Party dictatorship. But the principle of autonomy remains, even as the current Xi regime continues to vacate it of any meaningful content. In retrospect it is questionable as to whether Mao Zedong’s proposal was made in good faith. The acceptance of the terms, however, was made in good faith by representatives of Tibet and Xinjiang, still designated, if only in name, as the TAR and the XUAR.

Flagstaff, 10th December 2021

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