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PERPETUATING ETHNIC CONFLICT: PRC MINORITY POLICY IN THE
XINJIANG UYGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Broader Implications</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Understanding the Han-Uyghur Conflicts</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Introduction to Han-Uyghur Conflicts</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusions</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

On July 5, at least a thousand Uyghurs rioted in the streets of Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, killing 197 and injuring over a thousand, according to the New York Times (Wong). This deadly riot was a response to an incident between Han Chinese and ethnic Uyghur workers at a factory in Guangdong Province that had culminated in the deaths of two Uyghur workers (Wong). The Uyghurs were protesting the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) treatment of the factory brawl and murders and were calling for justice for their fallen kin. Both Xinhua News Agency, China’s official news agency, and CCTV, another government run news channel, claimed that the World Uyghur Congress, led by Rebiya Kadeer, was behind the Urumqi riot. The Chinese government took this incident very seriously and severely punished those involved by sentencing them with life sentences or even the death penalty. On December 3, five more people were sentenced to death for their roles in the riot, raising the total to fourteen to receive the death penalty and two others to receive life imprisonment, according to CCTV (5).

Was this a purely isolated incident or was it part of a cycle of ethnic violence? If it was not just an isolated incident, what caused Uyghur-Han ethnic hostility to occur more often and more violently? I argue that the factory incident and the subsequent July 5 protest were not random occurrences but part of a much bigger political issue that can give insight into ethnic conflict in other cases. To understand these incidents, I will look at the conflict through the lenses of competing theories in ethnic conflict. I will examine the causes and goals of the violent outbreaks as well as
the regional, domestic, and international factors that allowed the Uyghur population to
mobilize at particular moments. The main factors I will address are the Uyghur
identity, especially with regard to PRC minority policy, Islam, and international
influences. While it is likely that all of these are required in some form for conflict to
occur, I argue that the most crucial factor in allowing the Uyghurs to mobilize and
conflict to occur is PRC minority policy.

The Uyghur people are mainly concentrated in the Xinjiang Uyghur
Autonomous Region in northwestern China. Throughout this paper, I will refer to this
region as Xinjiang. However, other sources may refer to the same region as East
Turkestan, Chinese Turkestan, or Sing-Kiang. Xinjiang is a very important asset to
China’s security, both politically and economically. “China considers Xinjiang
indispensable because of its abundant natural resources and strategic location vis-à-vis
Central and South Asia” (Haider 523). It is a channel for trade between China and
many other states as it borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,
Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Xinjiang is obviously a very valuable asset to China,
due to its strategic location and rich supply of natural resources. However, the
inhabitants of this area are not Han Chinese, but mainly Uyghurs. Uyghurs are one of
China’s 55 ethnic minorities. In fact, “More than half the inhabitants of Tibet and
Xinjiang and more than one-third of those in Qinghai and Ningxia are ethnic
minorities; in the other seven provinces, the Han population predominates” (Lai 433).
The aforementioned western provinces all contain the greatest percentage of
minorities to Han Chinese. They also make up 56% of China’s total area (Lai 434).
Interestingly, these few provinces have the lowest number of Han Chinese people and yet make up more than half of China geographically.

The Uyghurs are an ethnically Turkic people, unrelated to the Han Chinese. They speak Uyghur language, which has Turkic origins. They have their own distinct culture, food, music, customs, and beliefs. They are also Muslim. Being Muslim greatly separates them from the Han Chinese, who are largely atheist. “Among China’s province-level units, the one with the highest Muslim population is the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, with a total of 15,155,778 people according to the 1990 census, among whom 9,236,366 belonged to Islamic nationalities” (Mackerras 29). If this statistic is correct, 61% of people in Xinjiang are Muslim. While difficult to estimate, the percent of religious people in the rest of China, an officially atheist state, is drastically lower. Already it is visible how different Uyghur and Han people are.

Islam is a large part of the Uyghur identity. It affects every aspect of life for Muslims. Yet, the PRC has historically been hostile to any organized form of religion. From 1949 to 1956 the PRC handled Islam cautiously in fear of inciting ethnic tensions between Uyghurs and Han (Rudelson 135). Then, in 1957, the policies became more Maoist in nature and religious institutions were shut down (Rudelson 135). During the 1960s and 1970s, religion was officially illegal, places of worship were destroyed, books were burned, and people were persecuted. Policies became far less tolerant. The Cultural Revolution highlights these intolerant policies. So from
about the late 1950’s to the 1980’s, policy on religion was strict. Mao hoped to unite all minorities and integrate them, creating one Chinese nation.

The PRC has just recently become tolerant of religion to a certain degree. After Reform and Opening in the 1980’s, lighter, more tolerant policies fostered a revival of Islam. Islam has held strong through all the policies changes over the decades.

“Circumcision, marriage, burial rituals, the Ramadan fast, Qurban Heyt, and dietary restrictions—all powerful components of Uyghur identity—have continued, even within modern cities like Urumchi” (Rudelson 136). These rituals differ from Han customs and yet have remained a strong part of Uyghur identity. While the Uyghur culture may be diluted in other ways, the PRC has not succeeded in decreasing the influence of Islam in Xinjiang. Perhaps Deng Xiaoping guessed that religious intolerance could foster religious radicalism and increased ethnic hostility. Certain exiled radical Uyghur groups still call for secession. By allowing a degree of freedom, the PRC appeases the non-radical Uyghurs. This tolerance is by no means complete. For example, the Dalai Lama still lives in exile in India and certain religions, like Falun Gong, are still illegal.

However, the PRC has succeeded in keeping the Uyghurs ignorant of their own history. In fact, “Until 1979, the Communists prevented the study of local history, condemning it as a feudal practice” (Rudelson 137). This was an effective tool used by the PRC to influence the region and spread CCP ideology. Rudelson states that controlling historical information has allowed the PRC to emphasize that Xinjiang has always been an inalienable part of China (138). By manipulating history, China has
forced Xinjiang to remain in the PRC. Yet over the years, certain Uyghur groups have made many bids for independence.

In the article, “Han-Muslim and Intra-Muslim Social Relations in Northwestern China”, Colin MacKerras suggests that Xinjiang poses a significant threat of secession from China. He states, “In Xinjiang, however, there is considerable support for an independent East Turkestan Republic among Uygurs, and certain Islamic groups are a major focus for this feeling” (Mackerras 33). Although many support the idea of independence, this may not be the goal of the mass protests. It may only be a stipulation of radical groups. One objective of my research is to find out how real this threat of secession actually is and if it is one of the goals of the Uyghur protests.

Historically, control over Xinjiang has been disputed because of its advantageous geographical position and resources. It has been pulled back and forth between one larger power and another, namely the USSR and China, and has never assimilated to either. Xinjiang has only experienced very short-lived periods of independence in recent history. According to Rudelson, Uyghurs first arrived in Xinjiang in 840 CE (157). Nicholas Vakar gives a detailed account of Xinjiang’s complex history starting in the 14th century when it was an independent state until 1765, when it became part of China (Vakar 120). Then, in 1884, China put harsh restrictions on Muslims, including prohibitions on press and political rights. This is also the year the province was named Sing-Kiang [Xinjiang], meaning “new frontier” (Vakar 120). This persecution lasted almost 50 years when, “In August [of 1933] a
Forhan 7

congress of Turks of Chinese Turkestan meeting in Aksu proclaimed the southern part
of the country an independent republic, and elected Khoja-Niyaz-Hajji as president”
(Vakar 122). In 1935, Xinjiang was still struggling for independence in limbo between
China and USSR control. This quasi-independence did not last since China again
annexed Xinjiang at the founding of the PRC in 1949. From all of this, we can see that
one major power or another has occupied Xinjiang for the past few centuries and the
Uyghur people have been subjected to the rule of these major powers, while struggling
and failing to attain independence.

China’s annexation of Xinjiang during the founding of the PRC was not
smooth. According to Vakar, it was a bloody battle between Muslims, Chinese and
Soviets (Vakar 121). However, as indicated by Henry G. Schwartz between 1954 and
1955 “Already it was apparent that the Communists sought to establish Chinese
dominance in minority areas where previously there had been few Chinese” (Schwartz
64). During the early years of the PRC, migration was relatively low. Once the PRC
gained political strength, Mao kept tight control on China’s peripheral provinces by
flooding these newly gained areas with Han Chinese in order to bring about
assimilation. Government sponsored Han migration into Xinjiang is one of the key
PRC policies that I will examine as a factor leading to the Han-Uyghur conflicts.

Broader Implications

Examining the Uyghur case in China can provide valuable insight to the field
of political science in the area of ethnic conflict studies. If we can determine the most
important factors contributing to the Uyghur conflict, we will gain a better understanding of the prospects for the PRC and the Uyghur people. It will help us to understand why certain ethnic movements are quashed and why others are sustainable. It will also help explain why ethnic groups may or may not appeal for independence and why in some cases, separatism leads to secession and in other cases it does not.

The Uyghur case is a complicated one that does not have just one single goal. The goals of the Uyghur protests differ depending on the specific event and the specific individual. Some Uyghur separatists aspire to gain independence for reasons involving religious and language freedom. Others are content to remain as a Chinese province, benefiting financially from the Chinese economy. Because independence has consistently been a goal of the Uyghurs in the past, it is likely that it may be the motivating goal behind the most recent deadly conflict in Urumqi. The July 5 riot was not the first conflict between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. It was just one even in the cycle of ethnic violence between the Han and Uyghur people. Yet, there may be other factors motivating the conflict as well.

The Uyghur case is a crucial one for China, even though the Tibetan case receives more international media coverage. Both regions are essential to maintaining China’s status as a growing world power. If Tibet and Xinjiang were able to secede, we might see the PRC dissolve in the same way the once powerful USSR did. It is possible that China fears precedent setting. With regard to these two provinces, “Precedent-setting concerns arise when states fear that granting independence to one group will encourage other groups to demand independence,” (Toft 85). For years,
Tibet has also been struggling for independence. If Xinjiang were to gain independence, it seems inevitable that Tibet would, too, and vice-versa.

The Uyghur case, though, is especially unique because of its deep ties to Islam. "The process of their Islamization was a long one, beginning seriously in the tenth century and reaching more or less total completion by the end of the fifteenth" (Mackerras 32). While the Uyghurs are not the only Islamic ethnic group in China, they follow Islam more strictly than any other group. This relationship to Islam ties Uyghurs to Muslims around the world and creates a deep ideological difference between them and the Han Chinese. Also, since they follow Islam more strictly than any other Chinese ethnic minority, it is likely that there are more religious radicals in this group than any other. Therefore, Islam could be a mobilizing factor in the Uyghur case.

Xinjiang’s ties to its border countries, while politically weak, are ethnically strong. “The populations of the two Turkestans, Russian and Chinese, is homogeneous: the Turkish tribes represent 80 per cent. of the population, and the rest is composed of Kalmyks (Torguts), Chinese Musulmans (Tungans), and Manchu Chinese” (Vakar 119). Chinese Turkestan refers to what is now known as Xinjiang. Russian Turkestan refers to the Russian republics such as Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, which have the largest Uyghur populations outside of Xinjiang. China is aware of these ethnic ties. The government has taken measures, such as establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to prevent cross-border cooperation and to maintain control in the region.
Ethnic identity can act as a strong bond and a fervent motivator. When an ethnicity is relatively concentrated in a specific area, nationalist sentiment is likely to form. As we can see, China’s policies have been aimed at prohibiting this sentiment to foster. Even since the founding of the PRC, China has focused on creating unity between all minorities. Its main goal has been to create one Chinese nation, and has been relatively successful in doing so. In fact, MacKerras states that the Uyghur case is surprising not because of how much conflict there has been, but how little (MacKerras 42). However, the reason these conflicts have not evolved into full-fledged war could be that the Chinese state has been able to crush them so quickly.

According to Stuart Kaufman, “Another requirement for ethnic war is opportunity: ethnic groups must have enough freedom to mobilize politically without being stopped by state coercion” (Kaufman 32). The PRC is not afraid to use force and harsh policies to quickly quell ethnic conflict and cut off communications with the rest of the world.

This thesis argues that the violent outbreaks in the Uyghur community are the result of the PRC minority policy and very closely correlate to oppressive changes in this policy. For example, in 1996, the Chinese government launched a new “Strike Hard” campaign to crack down on Uyghur separatist groups. Following the launch of this policy there were unprecedented levels of violence in the Uyghur community (Rudelson 171). February of 1997 was especially violent, beginning with over 10 protests involving thousands of Uyghur protestors, the derailing of a train carrying mostly Han passengers by Uyghur separatists, and multiple deadly bus bombings (Rudelson 171). The month of July 2009 also saw extremely high levels of violence in
the Uyghur community aimed at the Han. Prior to the 2009 violence, the PRC had cracked down on Uyghur separatism through continued Strike Hard campaigns in light of the upcoming 2008 Beijing Olympics. Also, in the month just prior to the riots, there had been a conflict between Han and Uyghur workers in a factory in Guangdong Province in which two Uyghur workers were killed. While the Chinese government claimed to have arrested the Han worker responsible for starting the conflict, Uyghurs protested in Urumqi to call for greater justice for their fallen kin. This protest turned violent when police became involved. I will go into both of these events in more detail in a later section of this paper.

In my analysis of this issue I will use competing theories in ethnic conflict studies to contextualize the issue. I will look at the arguments each perspective provides in order to best understand the Uyghur conflict in terms of political science. I will compare this case to others including perhaps the most similar case to date, ethnic conflict within the USSR. The PRC has based many of its political strategies on the USSR, which was once a powerful socialist government. The USSR under Lenin and Stalin focused on the “nationalization” of ethnic groups. China has copied USSR policies relating to governing autonomous region as well as minority education and language. In the next section, I will examine this issue in greater depth. Xinjiang’s long history with China is laden with conflict and struggle that is recently becoming more intense and gaining more international coverage. I am going to study this history of this relationship to discover what it means for China. China is a special case since it
Forhan 12

Forhan 12

is the strongest remaining communist government in the world today. This case will give us valuable insight into the field of ethnic conflict studies.

In this thesis I will first examine a few of the most relevant variables to the Uyghur situation, which will be outlined in the next section. Then, I will look at three specific instances of violence involving Uyghur-Han violence. The first will be the riot that killed about 60 in 1990. Next will be the Ghulja riots of 1997 involving about 1,000 Uyghurs and killing up to 300 people. Finally, I will take a closer look at the most recent deadly Urumqi riot of July 2009. For each of these instances, I will research the PRC minority policy during that time and any specific changes in policy that closely preceded the violence.

Understanding the Han-Uyghur Conflicts

During the past two decades, we have seen significant increases in violence between the Uyghur and Han ethnic groups. In order to discover why this conflict is becoming more prevalent and more violent, we must look at several variables. These variables are those that affect how much of a threat the PRC perceives the Uyghur minority to be and how the PRC deals with the Uyghur issue through policy and campaigns. We must also examine the factors that motivate the Uyghurs to mobilize against the PRC and the Han people. These factors are both internal to Xinjiang and the Uyghurs and external and include Islam and Uyghur identity, Tibet and the threats of secession and precedent setting, the Soviet example and Soviet minority policy, and PRC policy. In the following section I will discuss these variables to determine those
that most affect the Uyghur situation. I will also review some of the most popular theories in ethnic conflict studies, which could provide some insight into this situation.

The Tibet Issue

Like Xinjiang, Tibet has vied for independence for many decades. This region is also different from China proper in many ways, namely that it is a Buddhist region. Both Xinjiang and Tibet have experienced oppression and ethnic violence. Tibet is arguably the most widely publicized and controversial issue in China and is still a sensitive topic among Chinese and Tibetans. Throughout its bloody history, Tibet has made bid after bid for secession and has failed to achieve its independence, while China has demanded that Tibet pledge it will never separate from the PRC. In the past, the Dalai Lama has refused to give in to any of the PRC’s demands and vice versa. Recently, however, both the Dalai Lama and China’s demands have shifted. In the late 1970s, the Dalai Lama stated that the main concern of negotiations with the PRC should be the welfare of Tibetans, lessening the importance of independence (Sautman “Tibet”19). Ultimately, “Staying with China is seen as the best guarantor of Tibet’s interests and prosperity,” (He 606). While some critics accuse the Dalai Lama of selling out, others think of this shift as a short-term concession of unlikely independence for a long-term goal of cultural preservation.

China’s angle has also softened. “Fierce repression against protests in Tibet in the late 1980s boosted internationalization” (Sautman “Tibet” 11). This was a period of heightened tensions between the PRC and Tibet. Both sides stubbornly clung to
their own demands, making it impossible for any negotiations to take place. Even the US felt it necessary to take action because of the violence occurring between Tibet and the PRC. “The US Congress passed a non-binding resolution in 1991 stating that ‘Tibet is an occupied country’ and urging the US to recognize the TGIE [Tibetan Government-in-Exile] as the legitimate government of the Tibetan people” (He 605). With the US and many other states taking similar initiatives, China refused all bids for foreign mediation of negotiations between the PRC and Tibet. Not until the late 1990s did China’s stance start to change.

In 1998, China’s President Jiang Zemin held a summit, during which he showed a willingness to discuss Tibet and to involve foreign powers (Sautman “Tibet” 20). Discussing Tibet, a previously taboo topic, showed progressive development in China’s position. “In post Mao-era China, CCP accepted a trade-off of broader social and economic autonomy in exchange for continued political loyalty,” (Potter 318).

The Dalai Lama also showed development,

In 1992, the Dalai Lama demanded that Chinese leaders allow Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and East Turkestan [Xinjiang] “to become free and equal partners in a new world order.” In recent years, however, the Dalai Lama has emphasized cultural autonomy, played down political autonomy, and shown respect for the Chinese constitutional framework (He 609). There are a few possible reasons for the Dalai Lama’s shift in attitude toward the China’s demands. First, it is possible that the Dalai Lama had been waiting for the PRC to dissolve in the way of the Soviet Union.
The Dalai Lama has not concisely specified why he has undertaken the new initiative, but a likely reason is that China has not followed the Soviet path to regime change and dissolution, as predicted by émigré leaders in the 1990s, but has risen in importance in the current decade, a phenomenon that narrowly limits what émigré leaders can accomplish by mobilizing supporters (He 604). When China’s power only grew, the Dalai Lama realized he would have to take a different tactic. Another factor in the shifting demands is the Dalai Lama’s age. He is approaching 80 years of age and his health is declining. According to He and Sautman, if the Dalai Lama dies outside of Tibet, this could severely weaken the next Dalai Lama’s power (He 608). His age, therefore, is a strong motivator for the Dalai Lama to resolve this issue as quickly as possible and return to Tibet before his death. Third is the cultural factor. With the constantly increasing number of Han migrating to Tibet, the Dalai Lama is worried about preserving the Tibetan culture. “PRC concessions need to address the Dalai Lama’s greatest concern, the shifting population of Tibet and its effect on the survival of Tibetan culture,” (Sautman “Tibet” 20). Right now, the greatest threat to Tibet is the influx of Han people and culture. “The fear of group extinction, Horowitz argues in sum, leads to feelings of hostility, and then to group violence” (Kaufman 26). China’s practice of flooding the west with Han has led to a confrontation of cultures and peoples, increasing the likelihood of ethnic conflict.

“The likelihood of ethnic war is largely a function of how the principal antagonists—a state and its dissatisfied ethnic minority—think about a territory in dispute” (Toft 6). In the Uyghur case, the Uyghurs view Xinjiang as their homeland.
They have occupied this area for centuries. China views it as a resource-rich, strategically located inalienable part of the PRC. Many Uyghurs disagree and wish to be an independent East Turkestan Republic. To a state, challenging its borders is challenging its existence (Toft 7). The PRC fears precedent setting with regard to Tibet and Xinjiang, if one secedes, so will the other one. Although both sides have made measurable progress, it is not likely that a resolution will be made in the immediate future. For Tibet, resolving this issue would mean declaring that Tibet is an inalienable part of China. However, If Tibet were to secede, it would likely have implications for Hong Kong, Taiwan, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang, regions that have all previously called for independence. With Tibet setting the precedent for secession, these regions would gain motivation to secede, which would severely weaken the PRC. On the other hand, setting up a resolution in the near future could be mutually beneficial to China and Tibet, depending on the stipulations. However, it is safe to assume that the PRC will treat any future bid for secession with a strong hand of opposition.

The resolution would be extremely beneficial for the PRC if it could persuade Tibet to agree that it is an inalienable part of China. This would ensure that Tibet could not become an independent state, which would have an impact on other areas that are also trying to secede, namely its northern neighbor, Xinjiang. A speedy resolution could also be advantageous for Tibet. If Tibet is given cultural, language, and religious freedom, China will be in control politically. Tibet could also benefit economically by remaining part of China. Not only would Tibet benefit economically,
but the Dalai Lama would also be able to maintain sovereignty if he were able to return to Tibet before his death and continue the cycle of reincarnation. These benefits may be worth foregoing the demand for independence, at least temporarily. If Tibet refuses to budge, it risks losing the Dalai Lamas power and influence in the region, which will surely weaken if he dies outside of Tibet.

Tibet was not able to realize its dream of being a sovereign nation because the PRC did not crumble like the Soviet Union did in 1991. In the case of the Soviet Union, although it is debatable, one can argue that the breakup was due to its level of decentralization and autonomy given to its ethnic republics. “Although short-run repression works to suppress ethnopolitical mobilization, it does not effectively reduce the threat of secession. Power sharing can be more effective, but it also tends to encourage larger minority identitarian movements,” (Lustick 209). Following this logic, Dawn Brancati argues in her article, “Decentralization: Fueling the Fire or Dampening the Flames of Ethnic Conflict and Secessionism?” that decentralization can be a very effective tool to decrease ethnic tensions, but only in certain states (651). Since the Uyghurs have such a distinct culture and are ethnically distinct from the Han, decentralization might promote stronger separatist tendencies within Xinjiang. For example, in the article “Secessionism in Multicultural States: Does Power Sharing Prevent or Encourage it?” by Ian Lustick, Dan Miodownik, and Roy J. Eidelson, the authors state that strong states are more likely to have peaceful breakups while weak states are more likely to have turbulent breakups, depending on how accommodating they are to competing ethnicities’ demands. If we look at China, we can see a long
history of harsh repression of minorities’ activities. In the case of the Soviet Union, republics were granted extreme levels of autonomy and power was quite decentralized. In fact, China recently seems to be leaning towards giving its minorities increased autonomy as well. Although minorities were severely repressed during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, more recently, increased leniency and autonomy is visible in ethnic minority areas, such as Tibet and Xinjiang. There is debate as to whether this will cause increased mobilization of minorities or complacency, as the PRC intends.

The “National Question” in the Soviet Union

Comparing PRC minority policy with USSR minority policy can give valuable insight into this situation, since the PRC has modeled many policies off of the Soviet model. While China recently has been allowing its minorities more cultural freedom, particularly in the areas of education, language, and religion, the Soviet Union took this idea of cultural freedom to the extreme by nationalizing their ethnicities. Rather than try to integrate and unite the many ethnicities under communism, Soviet leaders furthered their segregation from one another and established practically self-governing territories based on this segregation. Lenin was the founder of this type of thought. According to Yuri Slezkine’s article “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism”, “Lenin’s acceptance of the reality of nations and ‘national rights’ was one of the most uncompromising positions he ever took,” (Slezkine 414). However, it was not until Stalin’s era during which “The ‘Great
Transformation’ of 1928-1932 turned into the most extravagant celebration of ethnic diversity that any state had ever financed” (Slezkine 414).

During this time the Soviet Union was divided into fifteen republics, mainly along ethnic lines and named for the majority ethnic group within that region. The Ukrainian SSR, for example, was mainly composed of Ukrainians. The Kazakh SSR was mainly composed of Kazakhs, and so on. “Much more significant in the long run was Lenin’s and Stalin’s common campaign for a strictly territorial definition of autonomy (Slezkine 417). Therefore, each nationality was separated from the rest by a distinct language and a distinct place. This heightened differences between groups and the awareness of these differences, which evolved into strong feelings of nationalism. This division provided the Union Republics with political borders, their own administrations, and practically everything needed to be their own sovereign states. Constitutionally characterized as sovereign, the Union Republics enjoyed, on paper, a broad set of powers including the right to secede from the Union and to enter into relations with foreign states and the authority to coordinate and control production and administration on their territory” (Brubaker 52). The right to secede was even, ironically, included in the USSR constitution. If China were this way, it would most likely be a much smaller state, since many regions would have seceded. Instead, it declares certain regions as autonomous and gives them certain degrees of freedom.

In contrast, China is not a federal state but has built a unique unitary system with special institutional arrangements, known as ‘minzu quyu zizhi’ (minority nationality autonomous governments), to accommodate the needs of
diversified nationalities as well as to forcefully maintain national unity. Based on China’s Constitution, any sub-national unit, either a province or an ethnic minority autonomous region, does not legally have the right to secede from China. (Zhu 333)

Therefore, China has the right to use force to stop any kind of separatist threat. China has copied many of the Soviet Union policies that we have previously examined. However, the PRC is aware that, given the chance, many areas would secede from the PRC, in essence destroying it.

While many argue that the cause of the breakup of the Soviet Union was its unstable and declining economy, others argue that its promotion of national rights within the Soviet Union and its strict codification of nationalities led to ethnic tensions and hence secession of its republics. In fact, “The Soviet state not only passively tolerated but actively institutionalized the existence of multiple nations and nationalities as constitutive elements of the state and its citizenry,” (Brubaker 49). After dividing the Soviet Union into fifteen republics, Soviet leaders constructed a complex, yet not necessarily effective, system of institutionalizing its ethnic groups through language and education. “By 1927, 93.7 percent of Ukrainian and 90.2 percent of Belorussian elementary-school students were taught in their native languages (that is, the language implied by the name of their ‘nationality’)” (Slezkine 432). Slezkine clarifies this issue in the next passage,

Theoretically at least, a Jew from a shtetl was to be educated in Yiddish even if his parents preferred Ukrainian (Hebrew not being an option), while a
Ukrainian from Kuban was to be taught in Ukrainian if scholars and administrators decided that her parents’ vernacular was a dialect of Ukrainian rather than a dialect of Russian (or a Kuban language in its own right), (Slezkine 432).

Lenin established this separate-but-equal policy in his drive to create equality among the republics rather than unity between them. “He believed that the recognition of the equality of nations and languages would assuage the political drive for self-determination,” (Kemp 48). While this idea seems to make sense theoretically, practically, it was ineffective and almost oppressive, given that this policy was purely based on ethnicity, not on native language, and the people themselves had no choice in the matter. Communism was not enough of a uniting factor.

In reference to the Soviet Union and its breakup, Kaufman argues, “The data seem clear: ethnic violence does not correlate closely with economic hardship or economic decline” (Kaufman 18). Ethnic violence and secession in USSR not related to economy, possibly related to other issues and made possible with minority policy of the Soviet Union. “Similarly, while the collapse of the Soviet Union was in large part the result of Soviet economic weakness, the pattern of ethnic violence cannot be explained by economic hardship: ethnic wars occurred in Georgia and Armenia, relative bright spots in the Soviet economy, while most harder-hit areas avoided them” (Kaufman 8). Therefore, we must look to other Soviet policies for an answer to this question.
Although the territory policy was divisive, it was not the largest factor in creating ethnic tension in the Soviet Union. What did cause the most tension between ethnicities was that many nationalities lived outside of their nominal national republics (Brubaker 55). For example, “One-third of all Armenians lived outside of Armenia, while nearly three-fourth of all Tatars – nearly five million in all – lived outside the Tatar Autonomous Republic,” (Brubaker 57). Brubaker goes on to say that, in total, a quarter of the Soviet population at that time lived outside of its own republic. Because many administrative positions in non-Russian republics were reserved for the ethnic group after which the republic was named, or the titular nationality, there was resentment between this group and other ethnic groups living in that republic. There were also positions reserved in each republic for ethnic Russians, giving rise to resentment within the titular nationalities.

While the political lines drawn to create the national republics created many problems for those living both outside and inside their titular republic, these lines eventually became the official boundaries of the successor states that resulted from the breakup of the Soviet Union. We can safely assume that there had been some degree of unity and legitimacy within each territory. According to Walter A. Kemp, Lenin figured that allowing the republics the freedom of secession would free them from oppression and cause them to realize that it was more beneficial to be part of a bigger entity. Lenin assumed that communism would be enough of a unifying factor. China seems to also think that freeing Xinjiang and Tibet from complete oppression, but also not allowing them complete freedom will be the most successful policy. “Therefore, if
one got rid of the element of oppression, nations would have no reason to seek self-
determination,” (Kemp 50). Lenin focused on achieving equality among all nations in
the USSR in the hopes that this would lead to a stronger union and less distrust. His
policies, however, were quite segregating.

The Influence of the Soviet National Policy on PRC Policy

China used and learned from many aspects of the Soviet model. “They copied
almost all the Soviet models in terms of administration, education, the economy and
military affairs. The government also followed the Soviet model by politicizing and
institutionalizing the ethnic minorities in China” (Ma 213). At the founding of the
PRC, China nominally gave Xinjiang some degree of autonomy and also treated Islam
cautiously, giving the Uyghurs room for cultural freedom. However, these policies
changed during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, during which
China used harsh policies to try to integrate all minorities and create one Chinese
nation. Since then, China has reverted back to using more Soviet-like policies to deal
with minorities, by once again allowing more cultural and religious freedom than was
allowed during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.

Yet, China has not quite given up on trying to integrate its minorities into Han
culture. Even though there are now policies that give minorities slightly more
autonomy to practice religion and speak their native languages, those that encourage
assimilation are more numerous. China is still keen on maintaining tight political and
social control in its minority regions. “Since the key goal of the Chinese Communist
Party’s (CCP) ethnic minority policy is to maintain national unity and internal cohesion, the minorities’ social, economic, and demographic characteristics always have a direct bearing on the policy decisions toward them,” (Zhu 330). While China keeps strict control over its ethnic peripheral regions, it also controls the flow of Han Chinese into them, which gives rise to tension between the ethnic minorities and the arriving Han. According to Pitman B. Potter’s article “Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China”,

While separatists have been emboldened by the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan and though Islamic revivalism is certainly in evidence, most unrest in Xinjiang appears to be the result of Uyghur ethnic hostility to Chinese policies of Han migration and subordination of local language and culture, rather than the product of Islam per se. (Potter 334)

Islam remains a vast cultural difference between the Uyghurs and the Han, but it alone is not responsible for the ethnic conflict between the two. Preferential policies are also responsible for some of the tension between Han and Uyghurs. New PRC policy changes that encourage minorities to officially identify as such have caused minority groups like the Uyghur to mobilize around this identity (Hoddie 119). In the past few decades, there has been a large increase in the number of people identifying as minorities, rather than as Han. Matthew Hoddie attributes this increase in the number of people identifying themselves as minorities to increased political incentives as well as an increased degree of assimilation. Since more people are identifying themselves as Uyghur, they are then distinguishing themselves from Han Chinese. This increased
ethnic awareness along with the influx of Han into this region is increasing the amount of tension between these two ethnicities.

As mentioned earlier, minority language policy also leads to increased ethnic tensions. According to Dwyer, in its early days, the PRC, like the Soviet Union, was officially and constitutionally supportive of minority languages. The following passage refers to the Interim Constitution of the early PRC, “Based on Article 53, the stated goals of this period included support for officially recognized nationalities to use their own languages and writing systems” (Dwyer 8). However, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution brought harsh changes to this policy, “The newly standardized form of northern Chinese known as putonghua (‘the Common Language’) became the flagship language associated with the new China; minority languages and cultural practices were to be shunned, as they were associated with ‘feudalism’ or worse” (Dwyer 8). At this time, all cultures besides Han culture were viewed as backward. Uyghurs were persecuted for being Muslims. During this period, the Uyghur language also suffered. In efforts to standardize the language, the PRC replaced the Uyghur Arabic script with a Cyrillic script in 1956 (Rudelson 101). Then in 1960, a Latin script was instated (Rudelson 102). Finally in 1978, modified Arabic script was reinstated (Rudelson 102). This string of policies caused confusion and educational problems. It was impossible for the language to develop.

Many of China’s policies echo those of the USSR, especially the minority language policy. For example, in Xinjiang and Tibet, there are schools taught completely in the Uyghur and Tibetan languages, respectively. There are also bilingual
schools that hold classes in the native minority language as well as in Mandarin.

Finally, in these regions there are schools taught completely in Mandarin. There is even the Central Nationalities University for ethnic minorities in China. “Minority universities do not have the same prestige as national universities and attendance at a minzu xueyuan may obligate a student to return to her home region” (Sautman “Preferential” 91). While ideal in theory, minority and bilingual schools cause problems for the Uyghur minority and even may be a disadvantage to them in life. If the student aspires to work outside of Xinjiang, sufficient knowledge of Mandarin is essential. Also, many universities now require minority students to pass the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK), or Mandarin Level Test to attend school there. So there are benefits to attending Mandarin schools. Yet, if the student is educated at a Mandarin school, his or her minority culture is diluted by the Han culture. Policies like these simultaneously attempt to promote integration but also promote nationalist sentiment within the minority groups.

**Explaining Xinjiang and Uyghur Nationalist Mobilization**

China, like the Soviet Union, is a multinational state. However, it is much more homogenous than the Soviet Union, which is one reason it is still intact (Zhu 332). It is made up of 56 official nationalities. The Han majority nationality makes up over 90 percent of the population, while the 55 other minorities make up less than 10 percent. Some of these nationalities are relatively assimilated and dispersed throughout China, like the Manchu (Zhu 334). Others are not assimilated and quite
concentrated in certain regions, like the Uyghurs (Zhu 334). Some of the more concentrated minorities have, at one time or another, attempted secession. For example, some still refer to Xinjiang as East Turkestan and believe that it is a nation in its own right.

The Soviet Union also faced this kind of “national question”, but dealt with it by institutionalizing its nationalities. It created autonomous national republics, each with its own titular nationality, each allowed, or forced rather, to carry out business and politics in its own language, and each given the option to secede. China has taken a different and especially strict route in the past when dealing with its minorities, but has recently become slightly more culturally lenient. Some argue that this leniency is allowing minorities, like the Uyghurs, to mobilize more efficiently. This puts China in a sticky situation, because repression only works in the short-run to prevent separatist movements (Lustick 209). This can be used to explain China’s extreme fluctuation over the decades between very harsh minority policy and more mild policies.

Since about the 18th century, Xinjiang had been pulled back and forth between its powerful neighbors, the Soviet Union and China (Vakar 120). Relatively recently, during the 1949 founding of the PRC, it was annexed by the PRC in a bloody battle between Muslims, Chinese, and Soviets (Vakar 121). According to Rudelson, Xinjiang was officially incorporated into to PRC as an autonomous region in 1955, at which time the PRC began enforcing very harsh minority policy. I already mentioned how China attempted to modernize the Uyghur people by forcing the Uyghur language through drastic transformations. Not only was the language policy quite severe, but
during the Great Leap Forward, which took place between 1958-1961, was an “anti-local nationalist” campaign that purged the administration of Uyghur cadres and non-Party intellectuals (Rudelson 102). Islamic leaders in Xinjiang were also treated very harshly during this period (Rudelson 104). In a later section of this paper, I will look at how these harsh policies fostered anti-Han and nationalist sentiment within the Uyghur community.

Like other relatively concentrated minority areas, the PRC considers Xinjiang and Tibet inalienable parts of China. However, Zhu cites one major difference that separates Xinjiang and Tibet from other minority areas in that they both had some periods of “quasi-independence” in the first half of the last century. “For example, Xinjiang was the Turkistan Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkistan during 1933-1934 and the Eastern Turkistan Republic from 1944 to 1949” (Zhu 337). Even though the independence may have been short-lived, it was enough to cultivate nationalist sentiment within the region. This sentiment has not disappeared through the twenty-first century, but still remains strong, especially in more radical Uyghur groups.

If we compare the Tibet and Xinjiang situations, it is almost as if they are going through the same phases of violence and bids for secession, but Xinjiang is a few decades behind Tibet. Tibet has already had periods of major protesting and demands for independence with strong international support. Lately, though, Tibet is focusing more on cultural and less on political autonomy and support for the Free Tibet movement has notably decreased. Xinjiang is still in the phase of violence and protests. Although some protests begin peacefully and only turn violent after the
interference by police, others are extremely violent in nature. Violence did not work for Tibet and it likely will not work for Xinjiang either. The PRC has a way of shutting down violence with harsh repercussions. For example, after the summer 2009 riots, there was no Internet access in Urumqi for 10 months (Uighurs).

Both Tibet and Xinjiang have experienced a mass influx of Han workers. This poses possibly the biggest threat the Tibetan and Uyghur cultures and is possibly the cause of most of the ethnic violence occurring in these two regions. Here, Rudelson refers to Uyghur intellectuals, “They are strongly anti-Chinese and resent the large influx of Chinese to Xinjiang, fearing that soon the Uyghurs will become a minority in their own autonomous region” (Rudelson 122). At the same time, some Tibetans and Uyghurs have recently migrated to China proper to live and work. However, “It should also be noted that this kind of mutual migration is mainly economically driven, rather than politically mobilized by the government, as happened in the 1950s and 1960s,” (Zhu 332). In the 1950s and 1960s, the Production and Construction Corps (PCC) was responsible for the majority of Han migration into Xinjiang. In 1954 it reorganized Han farmers and placed them in Xinjiang (Rudelson 37). According to Rudelson, the PCC has been a major factor in the PRC maintaining control over Xinjiang. In 2000, Becquelin notes “Most of the Han, who now make up 37% of the Xinjiang population, entered after the 1949 founding of the PRC” (Becquelin 65). Minorities who migrate into China proper are more likely driven by economics than by policy.

Another factor that greatly influences Uyghur identity and nationalism is Islam. Uyghurs are not the only Muslim minority in China. However, Uyghurs do
follow Islam more strictly than any other minority group. Islam shapes their culture and lifestyle in many ways. “The practice of Islam can be a strongly symbolic means of confronting the Chinese state” (Rudelson 47). Since China is officially atheist, the fact that Uyghurs are a strict Islamic group puts the PRC in a dilemma. From the mid-1990s, Islam has become an even greater part of minority identity in China (MacKerras 30). One reason for this recent increase is that PRC policies that allow religious tolerance allow a strengthening of Islam within minority communities.

In general, Strike Hard policies aside, the PRC has become more tolerant of minority religions. There are a few possible reasons for this. One reason for the policy change could be to allow enough religious freedom to prevent radical groups from forming. Another reason the PRC has recently become more tolerant of Islamic practices, says Rudelson, is to win over Uyghur intellectuals (129). Very strict and repressive policies could give rise to Islamic radicalism in the Uyghur community as well as anti-PRC sentiment among Uyghur intellectuals. Both radical religious groups and anti-PRC intellectuals pose a threat to China’s national security. To prevent these groups from mobilizing, China has allowed a small degree of religious freedom in recent decades.

Another possible reason that Islam has become even more important to the Uyghur identity is that Islam has also seen a revival globally. Because it is religion with the largest number of followers, Islam could be a very powerful mobilizing factor. China understands that, with international support, the Uyghur cause could become very powerful. According to a CNN article entitled “Al Qaeda Tells China’s
Uyghurs to Prepare for Holy War”, in 2009, Al-Libi, a prominent Al Qaeda leader, made a video statement to the public in reference to the Uyghur issue in China. “In his latest message, Al-Libi called on Muslims worldwide to support the Uyghurs” (Abedine). Al-Libi also threatened that the Chinese state will crumble the way the Soviet Union did after the invasion of Afghanistan (Abedine). This is a very radical view and yet, the majority of Uyghurs are not radicals. Therefore, Al Qaeda may not be important to the Uyghur community in Xinjiang. However, it does show that there is considerable international support for the Uyghur cause and that the influence of Islam is growing.

Although there is a resurgence of Islam and strong international support for Islam, the Uyghurs feel that their culture and Islamic customs are threatened. According to an interview of a few Uyghurs by MacKerras, “They were insistent that the secular education system was destroying their Islamic culture, and that the Koran ought to occupy the main position in any Uygur school” (34). First, the education system in China greatly favors Mandarin language schools, rather than minority schools. Second, Uyghurs are not given enough autonomy to create schools in Xinjiang that focus on the Koran. The Uyghurs fear that their culture is going to be wiped out. When an ethnic group is threatened with extinction, Horowitz claims, the potential for ethnic conflict increases (Kaufman 26).

In the past, wars were fought mainly between states. Nowadays, this does not seem to be true. Much more often religious or ethnic groups fight each other or their state. “Over the last decade, only 8 of the 110 armed conflicts were fought between
states; most of the remaining wars were waged between minorities and their state
governments over claims of self-determination (Wallensteen and Sollenberg, 2000),”
(Jenne 729). Studies in ethnic conflict are becoming more and more important to the
field of political science. In this section I will outline four of the major theories on
ethnic conflict and how they relate to the Uyghur-Han conflicts.

The first theory I discuss is ancient hatreds. This theory is based on the history
of relations between ethnic groups. It fits into the primordialist school of thought in
ethnic conflict studies. This theory claims that language, religion, culture and race are
factors that unite groups. “An ethnic group, in Anthony Smith’s definition, is a group
sharing five key traits: a group name, a believed common descent, common historical
memories, elements of shared culture such as language or religion, and attachment
(even if only historical or sentimental) to a specific territory” (Kaufman 16). As I
mentioned in the introduction, Xinjiang has had a long and bloody history with China.
The Uyghur and Han people do not share any of the traits listed above, leaving
nothing to unite these two groups. For example, the Uyghurs are ethnically Turkic
people, while the Han Chinese are ethnically Sinic. The Uyghur language is also a
Turkic language, which is phonetic and written in Arabic script. The Han Chinese
language is Mandarin, which is not phonetic, but written in characters. The majority of
Uyghurs are Muslim and the great majority of Han are not religious. It is obvious that
these two groups are vastly different. Zhu cites religion as the main source of national
sentiment within a group, “It is clear that adherence to a particular religious tradition
reinforces a sense of identity and underpins’ these groups’ more overt and frequent
demands for separation and independence,” (Zhu 336). In the Uyghur case, Islam creates Uyghurs’ strong sense of identity.

When there has been a long history of hostility between these groups, it can culminate in violent ethnic conflict (Toft 82). The Uyghur people began arriving in Xinjiang as early as the 8th century and were well established in this region by the 9th. Uyghurs, who are ethnically Turkic, do not have racial ties to Han Chinese. Uyghur and Han languages are also unrelated. In fact,

Three new republics created out of the demise of the former Soviet Union in late 1991 – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – share not only borders with China’s minority territories but also share the same religions and languages with the corresponding ethnic groups living there, such as Kazaks, Uyghurs, Kirgizs, and Tajiks. (Zhu 330)

Uyghurs are more related to Kazaks, Kirgizs, and Tajiks, than to Han. Also, these countries have the largest Uyghur populations outside of Xinjiang, making them much more closely related.

With the ever-increasing number of Han in western China, Uyghurs and Tibetans fear becoming a minority in their own home. According to Sautman, the Dalai Lama’s greatest concern for Tibet right now is the threat of constantly increasing numbers of Han flooding into Tibet and the effect on Tibetan culture. Xinjiang is also experiencing this kind of population shift as more Han look for opportunities out west. Also, as China’s economy continues to grow, more Uyghurs enter China proper for better job opportunities. “Nevertheless, this two-way domestic migration trend makes
any straightforward attempt to secede by any ethnic minority group more difficult, though it could also potentially increase the possibility of ethnic conflict if some ethnic groups’ demand for control over specific tracts of territory occurs,” (Zhu 332). This rate of migration could be the cause of much ethnic conflict within Tibet and Xinjiang.

While the ancient hatreds theory provides relevant input to the Uyghur story, as Stuart Kaufman says in his book “Modern Hatreds”, “It is important to realize, however, that although the hatred is all too often real, it is not ‘ancient’ but modern” (Kaufman 11). The hatred between the Han and Uyghurs has not been passed down through generations over hundreds of years. Instead, it is fostered by PRC policy, which alternates between oppressive and mild. The constant fluctuation of policy creates an unstable environment for Uyghur-Han relations.

A second theory in ethnic conflict studies relates to modernization and relative deprivation theory. This theory focuses on economic and developmental disparities between ethnic groups. Since, not only is China proper much more financially well off than Xinjiang, the Han-populated parts of Xinjiang are also much wealthier than the rest of the region. For instance, prior to PRC annexation, southern Xinjiang was the most prosperous and developed part. With the influx of Han workers and PRC projects in the region, the north became the area with both the highest development and the most Han. Understandably, the developing economic disparity between the Uyghurs and Han in this region likely led to some ethnic tension between the Uyghur and Han people.
The Chinese government maintains that Uyghurs’ refusal to modernize due to Islam. This would fall under the theory of uneven development and modernization. It is true that Xinjiang is generally more impoverished compared to the rest of China. It is also true that the Uyghur areas of Xinjiang are more impoverished than the Han areas. Many of the Han look down on the Uyghur people’s religious customs as primitive (Kaltman 128). Here is an opinion given by a Han university professor about the Uyghur people and their religion in relation to development,

“I’ve heard Uighur complain that they don’t feel that they can practice their religion as freely or as often as they’d like, but that’s the result of development. It isn’t that Uighur don’t have access to mosques. But the truth is, in modern society, there isn’t enough time to pray.” He [the Han professor] laughed and said, “Imagine, what if everyone was praying five times a day? How could anyone get any work done? Society wouldn’t move forward. Maybe some of the Uighur don’t want to move forward, I don’t know.”

(Kaltman 75)

This is not necessarily a refusal to modernize, but a result of China’s development policies in the west. Rather than train Uyghurs for specific jobs, the PRC shipped many Han Chinese from China proper to Xinjiang to do these jobs. However, the uneven development between the Han and the Uyghur areas causes a clash between the two groups that results in crime, especially since the Han in Xinjiang are benefiting from its development much more than the Uyghurs. Before the massive immigration of Han to Xinjiang, the south was the more developed, prosperous region,
inhabited mainly by Uyghurs. Since then, the Han development of the north has far surpassed that of the south. It is this uneven development between ethnic groups that can cause violent conflict (Toft 83). However, the level of a region’s economy relative to those around it is not cause enough for ethnic conflict (Kaufman 8). In the Soviet Union, Georgia and Armenia were relatively prosperous but laden with ethnic conflict, while other, poorer republics experienced much less ethnic conflict (Kaufman 8). For this reason, there is not enough evidence in the Uyghur case to support uneven development and modernization theory.

A third theory is that China is “ politicizing” its minority groups, by giving them political freedoms and making them political units, when it should be “ culturalizing” them to assimilate to the Han culture (Ma 199). According to this policy, by assimilating the Uyghurs to the Han culture, the PRC will create a greater feeling of national unity among the Uyghurs and Han. This has always been a goal of PRC minority policy, beginning with Mao’s hope for one Chinese nation. Many policies were extremely oppressive, with regard to forcing minorities to integrate. Today, some minorities are almost completely integrated with the Han. Yet, the relatively concentrated ones, such as Uyghurs and Tibetans, are not. In recent decades, however, China allowed the Uyghurs much more cultural freedom than in the past. According to Ma, rather than help the assimilation process, this policy will allow the Uyghurs to develop even more as a distinct group from the Han Chinese (214).

This is similar to the way the Soviet Union “ politicized” its ethnic groups by tying them to specific republics and guaranteeing them a high degree of
administrational and cultural freedom. Each republic also had its own language. This divisive policy eventually led to certain regions choosing to secede from the Soviet Union, which was completely legal, according to the Soviet constitution. Joining or separating from the communist PRC was also, at one time, legal (Zhu 340). Needless to say, this was quickly repealed and any separatist activities are now met with heavy PRC opposition.

Preferential policies are another way that the PRC “politicizes” its minority ethnic groups. In some aspects, it allows minorities more freedoms than it does the Han. For example, the Han are strictly limited by the one-child policy. However, urban Uyghurs are allowed two children and this law is not as strictly enforced. In rural regions, they are allowed as many as four children. Also, in Xinjiang there are Uyghur language schools, bilingual schools, and Mandarin schools that the Uyghurs may choose from for their child’s education. This gives the Uyghurs the opportunity to have their children educated in their native language, further separating them from the Han and increasing Uyghur nationalist sentiment.

A final theory of ethnic conflict that I will examine is elite manipulation. According to Toft, leaders use feelings of nationalism to manipulate the public for the leaders’ own ends (Toft 84). The Chinese government gave credit to the WUC, led by Rebiya Kadeer for instigating most of the Uyghur riots. According to the Chinese government, the elites of the WUC used the Xinjiang Uyghur to achieve their own goals. However, the WUC denied involvement in the violence that took place in Xinjiang and the rest of China. The WUC claimed that it orchestrates only peaceful
protests and that the deadly rioting occurred as a result of Han police using violence to break up an otherwise nonviolent demonstration (Fresh). Elite manipulation theory, while relevant in other cases, is not the most relevant theory to the Uyghur case. The three events that I will discuss later appear to have mainly been mass-led, rather than elite-led. Also, the PRC exiled many leaders and groups, who, it believed, would encourage violence against government control, therefore making elite-let violence unfeasible.

The theory that best fits my argument is the “politicization” theory. While the other theories are each relevant to this case, the “politicization” theory offers the best explanation to the current patterns of violence in the Uyghur community. The CCP policies alternately allow minorities more freedoms, at the same time “politicizing” the ethnic minority, and then repress them by taking these freedoms away and forcing assimilation. While minorities have typically been granted more freedom in the areas of language, religion, and family planning since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the PRC can unleash a policy like the “Strike Hard” campaign at a moment’s notice, specifically targeting minorities. This bipolar strategy allows for the development of increased nationalist sentiment within the Uyghur community as well as increased resentment toward the Han. The anti-Han feelings arise during periods of harsh, repressive policy. Then, during periods of more liberal, milder policy, nationalist sentiment and a cohesive identity are able to develop more fully within the minority groups.
Introduction to Han-Uyghur Conflicts

In the following section, I will introduce three of the most violent ethnic conflicts in recent history between Uyghur and Han people. The first occurred over the course of two days in Baren Township near the southern city of Kashgar in 1990. This was the first major ethnic conflict in Xinjiang since the founding of the PRC (Becquelin 69). The second major period of violent incidents occurred in February of 1997. The first incident in February 1997 took place in a city known as Ghulja in Uyghur language and Yining in Chinese. This first incident also occurred over the course of two days and involved numerous casualties. Three weeks later, on February 25, three buses carrying mainly Han passengers were bombed in Urumqi. Finally, the most recent episode of violence occurred in July of 2009 in Urumqi in response to an incident that had occurred between Han and Uyghurs in a factory in Shaoguan, China a few weeks prior. After introducing each of the incidents, I will then look at policy changes in the past leading up to the incident that could have possibly affected the violence.

The 1990 Baren Township Incident

In April of 1990, a small township near the city of Kashgar, Xinjiang experienced a violent ethnic clash between the Uyghur and Han people. This event is usually referred to as the Baren incident. However, some sources refer to it as the Akto incident, since Baren Township is in Akto County. Estimates of casualties range from 30 to 60 deaths. Rudelson states that the rioting occurred after city officials closed
down the construction of a Mosque (1). Next, Bovingdon gives a brief summary of the incident,

The Baren incident—which began with protests of CCP policies, developed into a riot and culminated in an armed attack on the local police station—shocked regional Party officials; participants shouted openly anti-CCP and anti-Han slogans, the event had involved extensive prior planning, and the rapid snowballing of the unrest betrayed widespread popular sympathies with the protestors. Many analysts see Baren as the impetus for tightening policies in the 1990s. (Bovingdon 74)

This was one of the outbreaks of ethnic conflict to occur since the founding of the PRC, especially in a small township. It was at this point the Chinese government realized it was dealing with ethnic separatism (Becquelin 69). Following this episode was a decade of stricter policies toward minorities. According to Becquelin, the combination of Islamic ideology, organization, and weapons technology allowed this event to occur (Becquelin 69). In my opinion, this is not a sufficient explanation to describe this outbreak of violence or later ones. Most of the unrest is not the result of Islam, but is the result of policies that flood Xinjiang with Han Chinese and dilute Uyghur culture (Potter 334). I believe this problem is part of a cycle that is rooted in PRC policy, in which these bouts of violence coincide with points of drastic changes in PRC policy.

To test this theory, we must look back at PRC minority policy since its founding in 1949. At the founding of the PRC, Xinjiang was included as part of China.
At this time, 90 percent of the population of Xinjiang was non-Han (McMillen 66). In 1954, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) was founded. This group was created to speed up development in the region while also spreading CCP ideology. The goals and responsibilities of the XPCC included many aspects of Xinjiang’s development. “The headquarters of the Xinjiang PCC at Urumqi comprised military staff units as well as departments of agriculture, animal husbandry, water conservancy, industry and commerce, finance and trade, supply and marketing, and transportation control” (McMillen 71). However, the covert goal of this organization was to guarantee social and ethnic stability. The XPCC was composed of about 90 percent Han and 10 percent minority nationalities (McMillen 71). During 1954, the XPCC recruited Han workers from areas in China proper. However, before being placed in Xinjiang, these Han received physical and ideological training and had to pledge to serve the Party (McMillen 76). We could consider XPCC workers as missionaries of the Chinese Communist Party. This training was to ensure that the PRC maintained control over the region and influenced it with the CCP ideology.

At this time, the population of Xinjiang began shifting as more and more Han entered. “The PCC provided an organization to which such settlers could be assigned for the production and construction work, and it facilitated a dramatic increase in the Han component in the region’s population” (McMillen 75). In 1955, Xinjiang was officially annexed, although it had unofficially been a part of China for already 6 years. At this time the name was changed from East Turkestan to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), although some still refer to it as East
Turkestan. Between 1956 and 1958 about 600,000 Han were sent into China’s western provinces (Dreyer 354). In 1975, the XPCC was abolished, but this did not affect the large number of Han entering the region. They continued to flow into the region looking for work. By 1979 there were 11 million Han living in Xinjiang (McMillen 66). Now they make up over 40% of the total population there.

Beginning in the late 1950s was the Great Leap Forward. Then the mid-1960s brought about the Cultural Revolution. Both of these periods were devastating to minority culture. During the Cultural Revolution, the religious were persecuted in order to bring about integration into one Chinese nation. “It is widely acknowledged that the hardships suffered by citizens of the PRC during the tumultuous years of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution were felt to an even greater degree among members of minority groups” (Hoddie 125). Perhaps this is because the minorities generally tend to be more religious than the Han. Religion was not tolerated. “The Red Guards also enforced a dress code—Uyghurs were not allowed to wear either their traditional doppa or white funeral turbans. Uyghur Islamic leaders, mollas, were severely attacked and forced to shave their beards; Korans were burned, mosques were destroyed, and prayer had to be done in private” (Rudelson 104). This passage shows the extent of religious persecution the Uyghurs faced during the first few decades of the PRC.

Also at this time, the minorities had to abandon their native languages for Mandarin. According to Dwyer, “The early years of the PRC minority-language planning in the PRC were critical in establishing and legitimizing the ‘low quality’ of
national minority cultures and, by implication, peoples” (Dwyer 9). This text refers to the Cultural Revolution period, which portrayed minority languages and customs as backward and primitive. Dwyer also mentions that language is such an essential part of a person’s identity and that flooding the Uyghur language with Mandarin Chinese depletes the Uyghur identity and culture (ix). Not only did the PRC promote Mandarin over minority languages, but Mandarin words were also being integrated into Uyghur language (Dwyer 27).

During the Mao era, political mobilization was impossible. Only in the 1980s when Deng Xiaoping opened China to the Western world did political mobilization begin to form. Reform and Opening (改革开放) was a liberalizing period for minorities after the oppression of the Cultural Revolution. This mobilization was not limited only to China proper, but to the minority periphery regions as well. “Many of the important policy changes towards the PRC’s national minorities are embodied in the 1982 State Constitution and then 1984 Law on Regional Autonomy for National Minorities” (Hoddie 126). Hoddie also mentions that many of the minority policies during the 1980s were preferential to the ethnic minorities (Hoddie 120). In China, in recent decades there have been political incentives to identify as a minority (Hoddie 119). Also during this time, there was a huge increase in the number of people that identify themselves as minorities, even taking into account the increase in birth rate (Hoddie 119). This Hoddie attributes to the preferential policies of the 1980s that gave people incentives to identify as minorities.
One of these preferential minority policies involves family planning policy. This was true in a few areas, including family planning. In many minority regions, ethnic minorities are not restricted by the one-child policy. In fact, in rural areas, minorities may be allowed to have up to four children (Rudelson 106). Minority family planning policy has also gone through fluctuations. “Although policies vary between provinces and counties, between 1984 and 1985 provincial laws changed so that ethnic minorities are now frequently exempted from the one-child-per-family programme” (Hoddie 127). From this information, we can assume that prior to the change in laws in 1984 and 1985 ethnic minorities also had to adhere to the one-child birth policy. While China’s ultimate goal is always unity and integration, applying this policy to certain minority groups was most likely very impractical and difficult to enforce. I am speaking mainly of the minorities that reside in rural western China, including the Uyghur.

During the 1980s, Xinjiang’s population was changing, the economy was developing, and although PRC minority policy was relatively liberal, tensions were already high. In 1989, we witnessed the democracy movement that took place throughout the country, culminating in a horrific event that no one will forget, Tiananmen Square. The movement involved weeks of protests, demonstrations, and even hunger strikes. Many Westerners remember the Tiananmen Square incident that occurred on June 4, 1989 because of the drastic measures China took to quell this movement. Not only was there a crackdown in Beijing, but also on other separatist movements throughout country, even in Xinjiang. Although Xinjiang joined in the
demonstrations about a month after they had started in Beijing and other eastern cities, Xinjiang experienced 8 days of demonstrations, which is more than some, like Tibet and Ningxia, which only experienced two days of demonstrations (Tong 319). Sichuan led the group with 57 days of demonstrations (Tong 319). The democracy movement and the Tiananmen Square incident led to strict policies throughout the following decade to ensure social stability in the PRC.

This strict tightening of policies after Tiananmen may have prompted officials in Akto County to halt construction of the Mosque, the event that spurred the protests. This may have been the last straw in the combination of policies further suppressing the Uyghur people and their culture. The 1960s and 1970s brought about anti-Han sentiment in the Uyghur community because of minority cultural oppression during the Cultural Revolution, especially with regard to religion. During that time, mobilization was impossible, but with the Reform and Opening policies of the 1980s, as well as the preferential policies toward minorities, came new opportunities for mobilizing.

Earlier, we discussed how the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps greatly increased the number of Han migrating into Xinjiang. Although it was abolished in the late 1970s, it was reinstated in the 1980s with an influence just as strong as before. In fact, there was major Han migration to Xinjiang from Hangzhou, a city in eastern China, in 1989 and 1990 (Rudelson 69). This major arrival of Han in Xinjiang occurred immediately prior to the demonstration and ethnic conflict in Baren Township in 1990.
In summary, directly before the Baren Township incident we witnessed several drastic policies changes. First, there was the serious crackdown on Tiananmen Square, which resulted in numerous casualties and gave rise to PRC resentment throughout the country. Tiananmen Square also led to a tightening of PRC policy. Then, there was the massive influx of Han into Xinjiang continuously for two years prior. The implications of these policies resulted in unrest and ethnic tension in the region that culminated in the Baren incident.

The 1997 Ghulja/Yining Incident

February of 1997 was a particularly bloody and violent month in Xinjiang’s recent history. In 1997, conflict flared up again this time in the city known as Ghulja in Uyghur language, Yining in Chinese. On February 5th, an allegedly peaceful demonstration was broken up violently by police, killing dozens to possibly hundreds. This peaceful demonstration began as about a hundred Uyghur students waved the flag of East Turkestan and called for the end of PRC rule in Xinjiang (Rudelson 171). Then police fired on them (Rudelson 171). The World Uyghur Congress (WUC) website also gives a description of the event “Between ten and fifteen thousand demonstrators in Ghulja took part in a non-violent march in 1997 to protest in support of equal treatment, religious freedom, and an end to racial discrimination in response to ever more repressive policies and practices against the majority Uyghur community in Ghulja” (Thirteen). The WUC website states that in the aftermath of the protests,
Dozens and possibly hundreds of Uyghurs were executed, some in public, following summary trials; many others were sentenced to lengthy prison terms, including life, on charges of ‘hooliganism’. Other people simply disappeared, and are assumed to be either in prison or dead, their remains disposed of without their families being informed. (Thirteen)

According to an Amnesty International report,

The demonstration was sparked by growing levels of repression of Uighur culture and religion in and around Gulja. This included the banning of traditional Uighur social gatherings, called meshreps, which were organised from 1994 in an attempt to revive cultural and Islamic traditions. Uighur community leaders in and around Gulja also organised local Uighur football teams in an unofficial league, but these were also closed down by the authorities and sports facilities were destroyed. (China)

This report shows evidence that the Uyghur culture was extremely repressed by 1990s PRC policies, which were particularly repressive after the policies of the 1980s.

These policies include the Strike Hard (严打) campaigns that cracked down on religious and cultural freedom in Xinjiang and Tibet. Strike Hard campaigns began in China proper in the late 1970s and reached western China in the 1990s. These campaigns were aimed at lowering crime rates through mass arrests and expedited trials. Some also argue that these campaigns increase the number of people sentenced to capital punishment (Strike). When the Strike Hard campaigns reached Xinjiang, they were aimed less at lowering crime rates and aimed more at increasing political
control in minority regions. “Large numbers of Uighurs were arrested on suspicion of being so-called ‘separatists, terrorists or religious extremists’, particularly during a ‘Strike Hard’ campaign against crime in 1996, including alleged meshrep leaders as well as religious students and imams,” (China). Also during the Strike Hard campaigns, “Xinjiang Public Security announced that more than 2,700 terrorists, murderers, and other criminals, presumably of various ethnic groups, as well as 4,000 sticks of dynamite, 6,000 pounds of explosives, 30,000 rounds of ammunition, and 600 firearms were captured in two months” (Rudelson 171). Because of the amount of the arrests and the speed at which these charges and arrests were made, they are open to some doubt as to their degree of accuracy.

On February 6th, conflict struck again because of the previous day’s outcome. Reports differ on the actual number of people killed during these two days of conflict. However, all reports do claim hundreds injured in these activities that had supposedly originated as a peaceful demonstration. On February 12, a Han-filled train traveling to Urumqi was derailed (Rudelson 171). Less than one month later, violence struck yet again in the form of dual bus bombings in Xinjiang’s capital city, Urumqi. On February 25, three buses filled with mainly of Han passengers exploded in Urumqi. These acts of violence were closely followed by more bombings in Beijing and in Xinjiang. Two exiled groups, the United National Revolutionary Front and the Organization for East Turkestan Freedom, claimed responsibility for these bombings and threatened more (Rudelson 171).
Interestingly, these events also coincide with the death of Deng Xiaoping, which occurred on February 19, 1997, and his funeral, which took place on February 25. MacKerras predicts this tie between Deng’s death and ethnic conflict as he states, China is unlikely to break up due to religious and ethnic conflict in the near term. Such an eventuality, however, could occur in two ways. One is a long-lasting civil war in which the religious opponents of the Chinese government were supported by strong foreign powers. The other is the total collapse of the central government in the wake of the death of Deng Xiaoping. (MacKerras 43)

On the first option, we see China taking a number of measures to prevent this kind of support. First, China prohibits foreign intervention on its internal issues, which include human rights and ethnic minority issues. This strategy has been very successful in assuring that minority campaigns, movements in Tibet or Xinjiang for example, obtain little foreign support. Because China is becoming a major competitor in the global balance of power, many other major players are eager to create and maintain a stable relationship with China. International intervention on behalf of ethnic minority issues would threaten state sovereignty and would cause relations between China and the intervening state to deteriorate. On the second option, we have seen increased ethnic violence with the death of Deng Xiaoping, but the Chinese state has stayed strong. The Chinese government has quashed all bouts of ethnic violence with a strong hand and with severe policies that include shutting down communication systems like phone
and Internet technology in the wake of these events. I will discuss this particular strategy in regard to the 2009 riots in Urumqi.

February of 1997 was an extremely violent month in Xinjiang because of the preceding PRC policies that affected the Uyghur people and their lifestyle. The Strike Hard campaigns specifically targeted minorities and their religions. During this time, certain Islamic practices were put to a halt by the PRC. The Uyghur lifestyle went through a complete change, since many of their daily activities were made illegal by the Strike Hard campaign. This policy was very oppressive to the Uyghur culture. The combination of severe Strike Hard campaigns in Xinjiang and the banning of Uyghur social gatherings caused mass feelings of unrest and anti-Han sentiment during the 1990s. Also, with the death of Deng Xiaoping, Uyghurs found an opportunity to display their cause in the international media.

**The 2009 Factory Incident and Ensuing Urumqi Riots**

On July 5, 2009, violence erupted once again on the streets of Urumqi. Uyghurs were protesting the deaths of two Uyghur workers at a factory on China’s east coast in Guangdong Province. These two workers were killed when a brawl broke out between Uyghur and Han workers after the Uyghur workers were falsely accused of raping female Han workers. The rape rumors were started by an ex-employee of the factory, who, the Chinese government says, was subsequently arrested. This one arrest was not enough to appease the Uyghur people. They protested for justice for the slain Uyghur workers on July 5. The protest began nonviolently, but turned violent after
police became involved. Although reports differ slightly, the New York Times estimates the death toll to be 197, with up to a thousand injured (Wong).

In the aftermath of this incident, the Chinese government shut down the Internet and telecommunications. According to the WUC website, the Internet was only just restored in Xinjiang in May 2010, after 10 months of no Internet and telecommunication (Uighurs). This website also states that “During those 10 months, a great deal of information about the events of July 2009 was never allowed to surface, and the world was left with a Chinese government account that in no way can be considered impartial” (Uighurs). The PRC’s treatment of this incident brings to light the censorship issue in China. For example, social networking sites like Facebook and Youtube, where users can express shared interests in social issues and also can upload personal videos and other media are completely blocked in China. These sites pose a threat to the PRC control over the Chinese people because they allow complete freedom of speech and expression and allow people to organize. The issue of censorship in China also brings up the recent problems with using the Google search engine in China. Google has recently debated leaving China because of China’s censorship. For example, if someone in the US googles the same topic as someone in China, depending on the sensitivity of the issue in China, the search results could be totally different. Google has decided it will no longer put up with the Chinese government censoring search results and has threatened to leave if this is not changed (Meserve). China is now discovering the difficulties of dealing with foreign companies that oppose certain domestic policies.
The Chinese government dealt with this incident with no leniency. On December 3, 2009, five more Uyghurs were sentenced to death for their roles in the riot, raising the total to fourteen to receive the death penalty and two others to receive life imprisonment, according to CCTV, the main Chinese news station (5). The total is likely higher at this time, because there have been subsequent trials since then.

While some reports, like those made by Xinhua News Agency, claimed that the riot was orchestrated by the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), led by exiled leader, Rebiya Kadeer, Kadeer denied involvement in these activities. According to the WUC website, the WUC is a democratic organization that represents the Uyghur people in East Turkestan and abroad and was established in 2004 (Introducing). The WUC website also gives a brief biography of its president Rebiya Kadeer. Initially, as a prominent businesswoman, political activist, and philanthropist in Xinjiang, the Chinese government supported her efforts to educate Uyghur women. However, when she criticized government policy in a speech in March 1997, she was restricted from traveling abroad and then arrested in 1999 (WUC). In her speech she specifically criticized the harsh treatment of Uyghur students by police during a demonstration in Gulja that occurred a month prior, which resulted in the deaths of dozens of Uyghurs (WUC). According to the website, she was sentenced to eight years in prison, but was released in 2005 after six years. The Chinese government has labeled her as a terrorist, while the rest of the world has lauded her endeavors. For example, the WUC website states that she has been awarded the highest award given by the Human Rights Watch. She has also been nominated for the Nobel Prize in 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008.
The fact that Kadeer is on China’s terrorist group list provides reason to doubt the legitimacy of the rest of the groups labeled as terrorist in China.

The late 1990s and early 2000s brought about many policy changes in China relating to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. One of these changes was the establishment of the Group of Five. "In April 1996, and again in April 1997, the presidents of China, Russia and the three newly independent countries bordering China to the west, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, signed agreements in Shanghai (1996) and Moscow (1997) aimed at preserving peace along the borders and forestalling Muslim separatism," (MacKerras 43). While these countries may not have expressly wished to suppress the Muslim groups within their borders, they did wish to foster good relations with China. The creation of the Group of Five was a very strategically intelligent move on China’s part, as it unites China and its border countries and prevents cross-border cooperation between Muslim groups. These states are home to the largest populations of Uyghurs outside of Xinjiang, and therefore would be the most threatening to the PRC if Uyghurs decided to band together across its borders. Fortunately for China, the Group of Five expressly prevents this from occurring.

Further highlighting the PRC fear of Uyghurs banding together against the PRC is the restriction on language-family research. “Secondly there is a covert prohibition in PRC academia of comparative research within language families. Researchers avoid studying etymologies of related languages lest the evidence they uncover point to hypothesizing a new language grouping” (Dwyer 32). This, of course, was to encourage integration and prevent strengthening minority identity.
Turkic is a case in point: Although the collocation *Tujue yuzu* (“Turkic language family”) alone was acceptable in official discourse until at least 1996, under no circumstances was the adjective *Tujue* allowed to be used in any other context. Also forbidden (as indicated by the following asterisks) were for example the phrase *Tujue wenhua* (“Turkic culture”) and *Tujue ren* (“Turkic person”). To the authorities in Beijing, the idea that Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uyghurs, Tatars, and Uzbeks could all consider themselves Turkic is no doubt alarming. (Dwyer 31)

Restricting information in the past has kept the Uyghurs in the dark about their own history. Local history was not even allowed to be studied until after 1979 (Rudelson 137). Keeping the Uyghurs in the dark about their own origin and history has allowed the PRC to spread the idea that Xinjiang is an unchallengeable part of China.

According to China Daily, China’s Western Development Strategy officially began in January 2000 (Western). In 2005, in conjunction with the Western Development Strategy, minorities are exempted from paying compulsory education fees (Chronicle). “In the last 10 years, the central government had financed more than 3.5 trillion yuan ($512.4 billion) to support development of the western region, according to the statistics from National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC)” (Western). It is very obvious that China has a great interest in influencing this region.

In 2001, the Group of Five, which included China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, added Uzbekistan and became what is now known as the
Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This organization had major implications for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, especially since there are large Uyghur populations across the Chinese border in these neighboring states. In fact, these countries have the largest Uyghur diaspora groups outside of Xinjiang, and therefore could pose a threat to Chinese security if those groups decided to band together against the PRC. Part of the agreement of the SCO prohibits these countries, or groups in these countries, from supporting the Uyghur separatist cause. “China has been successful in persuading SCO member states to restrict the activities of the Uighur population living within their borders. Countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and even Turkey have disbanded several Uighur political parties and restricted their ability to assemble” (Sznajder 93). This organization was strategically formed with the intent of strengthening relations with its border countries while assuring that Uyghur populations within these countries have no way of organizing with the Uyghur population within China. With very little power under strict Chinese control inside Xinjiang and no cross-border support, it seems unlikely that Uyghur separatists will achieve any goal of secession in the near future.

China has taken another strategic step to further assure that Uyghur activities do not gain support and become a threat. After the 2001 US declaration of the global War on Terror, along with the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, China jumped on the terrorism bandwagon by declaring four Uyghur groups as terrorist, one of which made it onto the US list of terrorist groups. The Chinese government has accused the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) of
working with the Taliban and with Al-Qaeda, but the ETIM denies involvement with both. While this group and its members deny the association between themselves and Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the US, like China, added it to the US list of terrorist groups. This has proved very controversial since the imprisonment of 17 Uyghurs in the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison. The Chinese government accused these Uyghurs of being involved with the terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Mears). While they were residing in Pakistan at the time of their arrest, they deny any involvement with both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Recently, the Supreme Court has arranged for the release of all 17 of the Uyghur prisoners (Mears). More controversy arises with the issue of where to send them. Some of them have been cleared to be released since 2003, but have been held at Guantanamo Bay since no country had volunteered to host them and Presidents Bush and Obama have been hesitant to allow them residence in the US. The previously imprisoned Uyghurs have said they will be persecuted if sent back to China and wish to claim political asylum in the US or in other countries. China has said that the returned Uyghurs will not be harmed but warns other countries against accepting the Uyghurs (Frieden). Recently, four of the seventeen Uyghurs have been placed in Bermuda (Frieden). According to Dwyer,

As Washington has begun to realize, its anti-Uyghur policies, even those only targeted at violent fringe groups, have already generated negative sentiment in Xinjiang towards the United States. Policies perceived as anti-Uyghur or anti-
Muslim could well radicalize previously apolitical Uyghurs, pushing them into militant or radical Islamic groups. (Dwyer xi)

By imprisoning those 17 Uyghurs in Guantanamo Bay and not allowing them asylum in the US after their release is sure to have stirred some anti-American sentiment within the Uyghur community. While it has not explicitly been stated that these people have been falsely charged with terrorist activity and actually have no ties to either Al Qaeda or the Taliban, it says a lot that President Obama has arranged for them to be released from the prison.

Prior to the Urumqi riots of July 2009, China engaged another strict and controversial policy that directly affected the Uyghur population. The most recent of the Strike Hard campaigns started in 2006. Strike Hard campaigns are used periodically throughout China by the Chinese government, originally to round up criminals and illegal workers. According to a report published by the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy, “Strike Hard: China’s Crackdown on Political Dissidence”, the campaigns began in 1983 during the time of reform and opening in order to maintain social control, but became an instrument to eliminate political dissidence (v). These campaigns reached Tibet by 1996. Later on, it was also aimed at the Uyghur population. The Strike Hard campaigns have not lessened in recent years, especially before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In 2008, “In addition to its continued crackdown on groups such as Falun Gong, which China considers a “cult”, the government harassed Uighur Muslims and confiscated some of their passports to prevent their taking part in the hajj, the pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia” (Labott).
According to the British newspaper, The Guardian, in a 2009 article entitled “China Detains 81 People in Tibet Crackdown”, “The authorities have used them periodically since, often in the run-up to major events, and punishments meted out can include lengthy jail sentences and the death penalty” (Branigan).

Earlier we looked at how China attempted to modernize the Uyghur language during the early years of the PRC. We examined the script changes Uyghur language has suffered through at the insistence of the Chinese government. Education is another area in which the PRC promotes assimilation. Although China provides the option of Uyghur language schools in Xinjiang, it also encourages the use of Mandarin in the region. “HSK tests are now being used as a requirement for minority advancement at some historically minority universities (such as Xinjiang University). Only achieving a minimum score on the HSK test can guarantee academic promotion” (Dwyer 33).

HSK stands for Hányu Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì, which literally translates to “Chinese Level Test”. The HSK measures the Chinese language ability of those who take it. If this is required at universities, minority students wishing to obtain a university education will most likely choose to study at Mandarin schools rather than at their own minority language schools. Dwyer maintains that the mid-1980s policy shift from minority language accommodation to assimilation, which overtly favors Mandarin, has been ineffective to the Chinese goal of uniting all ethnic groups under one nation (x). However, one could argue that it has been successful in somewhat diluting the Uyghur language and culture. This is only one among many aspects of Uyghur culture that is threatened by Han culture.
Conclusions

All of these incidents began as nonviolent protests and ended in deadly ethnic conflict. The alternation between liberal and strict policies over the past three decades has given the Uyghurs cultural freedom followed by cultural and political oppression. These periods of strict policy and political oppression cultivate anti-Han sentiment, while the periods of milder, more accommodating policy allow enough freedom for these feelings to be released in a powerful and violent way. Because the tensions have built up so much, at times when police intervene, the initially nonviolent protests become deadly.

The suffering the Uyghur people went through during the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward cultivated strong anti-Han sentiment within the Uyghur community. First, the Great Leap Forward attempted to force modernization on all Chinese citizens. Then, the Cultural Revolution attempted to unite all ethnicities through strict religious, intellectual, and cultural persecution to create one Chinese nation. The Uyghur language also suffered during this time, going through many transformations as the PRC attempted to modernize it.

Strike Hard campaigns and XPCC policies also played a big role in increasing anti-PRC and anti-Han sentiment in Xinjiang. These policies effectively increased PRC control on the region, but also created tension between the Han and Uyghurs. Although the Strike Hard campaigns initially were aimed at and succeeded in lowering crime rates, they later became means for the Chinese government to persecute ethnic
minorities through swift trials and speedy sentencing. The cultural and religious freedoms the Uyghurs experienced through the preferential policies of 1980s hindered the integration process that began during the Cultural Revolution. These policies allowed the Uyghurs to remain as a culture distinct from the Han, who entered the region in great numbers. Han in Xinjiang generally had better jobs than the Uyghurs. Han areas also became more developed than the Uyghur areas.

Immediately prior to the Baren Township incident in 1990, most violent conflict between Han and Uyghurs since the founding of the PRC, were a series of harsh minority policies followed by a more open period, a mass influx of Han into Xinjiang, and a severe crackdown on the democracy movement all over the country. The 1997 demonstration and riots in Ghulja were preceded by Strike Hard campaigns reaching western China, the banning of many Islamic practices, the formation of the Group of Five and prevention of cross-border support for the Uyghur cause, and the death of PRC leader Deng Xiaoping. Before the deadly riot of July 2009 was the establishment of the SCO, severe Strike Hard policies preceding the Beijing Olympics, and a huge increase in the amount invested by the Chinese government in the Western Development Strategy, meaning more Han influence in the region. In the years preceding each of these violent incidents, the PRC flip-flopped back and forth between harsh and mild policies and inundated the region with Han people and PRC ideology. This combination greatly increased tension between the Uyghurs and the Han.

However, while tensions have grown in Xinjiang, the call for independence has not necessarily also grown. “In Xinjiang, as the above figure suggest, quite a few
Uyghurs are now joining the CCP, and although many of their co-nationals suspect opportunistic reasons their action carries the implication that they expect the CCP to be in power for some time to come” (MacKerras 29). This evidence suggests that the Uyghurs and Tibetans alike might believe that secession is impossible in the near future. In fact, many Uyghurs may view remaining as part of the PRC as more beneficial for the time being than to continue demanding independence. The Dalai Lama is also now focusing more on maintaining cultural sovereignty in Tibet as opposed to strictly calling for independence. If the evidence given in the above passage is true, Uyghurs may also be lessening their demands for independence in return for the guarantee of cultural and religious rights. According to Kaufman, when one ethnic group is threatened with extinction, ethnic tensions between that group and the threatening group will arise (Kaufman 39). It seems that the two ways to avoid ethnic conflict would be for the PRC to allow the Uyghurs complete cultural freedom or to completely overcome the Uyghur culture with Han culture, but alternately allowing cultural freedom and then taking it away can only give rise to intense political conflict.

As mentioned earlier, at the time Xinjiang was annexed into the PRC, it was 90% non-Han. Now Han are the second largest group there, making up over 40% of Xinjiang’s total population. This huge increase in Han in the region is mainly due to overt policies that promote Han in-migration and spread PRC ideology. This large population increase has also greatly increased the use of Mandarin in the region. Also, some problems arise because of the non-Muslim Han and Muslim Uyghurs living in
close proximity to each other with regard cultural practices such as eating or praying. Some issues have come up because of Han slaughtering pigs or eating pork, both of which are offensive to Muslims (Rudelson 63). A Han man said that Uyghurs are lazy or against modernization and inefficient because they must stop their work in order to pray five times a day (Kaltman 75). This, he says, leads to the inability to modernize. While there is a certain degree of validity to this claim, when compared to the other major religion in western China, Buddhism, Islam is relatively progressive in terms of development. Still, because of the religious and cultural differences, tensions are high in this area and lead to conflict. The segregated education system also intensifies the awareness of differences between the two ethnicities. Also, minority language schools have a negative connotation when compared to Mandarin schools, which are known for being higher quality. As I stated earlier, all minority students must score a certain score on the HSK Mandarin language test in order to attend college at most universities. This creates ethnic tension and also begins to dilute minority culture, which is the intention of these PRC minority policies.

In April 2010, the government of Kyrgyzstan was overthrown in an anti-government protest that turned violent. An interim government is now in control of the country. As one of the six members of the SCO, it is unknown what the future will hold for this organization and what the potential implications of its failure could be. The main objectives of this organization have included increasing China’s control in the region, with specific conditions regarding the Uyghur people and their demands. With substantial Uyghur populations across the Chinese border in Kyrgyzstan and
other neighboring countries, this regime change could allow for increased mobilization in the Chinese Uyghur population and increased cooperation between the Chinese Uyghur population and Uyghur populations in other countries. This kind of cooperation is currently considered a terrorist activity and is prohibited by the SCO. China is still rapidly growing economically and politically, so it is unlikely that the other members of the SCO will drop out and risk creating tension with China. However, if Kyrgyzstan backs out, this could give the Uyghurs a greater chance at mobilization with foreign support.

It is unlikely that this tension will dissipate any time in the near future. The Uyghurs are far from assimilating to Han Chinese culture. Repressive policies will not be successful in integrating the Uyghurs, but will only cause heightened ethnic tensions and conflict. Independence is also an unlikely outcome in the near future. Therefore, maintaining policies that allow moderate to high degrees of cultural and religious freedom in Xinjiang is key to appeasing the majority of the Uyghurs. However, keeping some level of harmony in the region may prove impossible in Xinjiang and warrants further study on this issue.
Bibliography


