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Date deposited: 11th November 2011

Version of file: Author final

Peer Review Status: Peer reviewed

Citation for item:

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http://www.brill.nl/about/imprints/global-oriental

Publisher’s copyright statement:
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http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/000000011797372940
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‘No rights without duties’:

Minzu pingdeng [nationality equality] in Xinjiang since the 1997 Ghulja disturbances

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Abstract

This article analyses the handling of the Ürümchi riots of 2009, and of the Shaoguan incident which provoked them, from the perspective of ethnic inequality and discrimination. The core argument posits that, in the eyes of the state and many of its Han subjects, pre-1997 dreams of Xinjiang independence represented a precocious attempt to break away from the state patron. As articulated in the PRC Constitution and policy documents, the provision of nationality equality in contemporary China is contingent upon the duty to defend the nation-state; with this duty once abandoned, those rights are forfeited. I show how riot targets reflected Uyghur perceptions of increased socio-economic marginalisation since the 1997 Ghulja disturbances, a period characterised by state crackdowns and reduced civil rights. Finally, the article explores the ways in which Chinese leaders have begun since late 2010 to address the socio-economic and linguistic-cultural roots of the conflict. In conclusion, I suggest that long-term peace in the region depends upon effective implementation of new and existing policies and the authentic devolution of policy-making power to local Uyghur (and other minority nationality) officials and scholars.

Keywords

Ürümchi riots; Shaoguan incident; Uyghur; Xinjiang; social inequality; ethnic discrimination; equal rights
Introduction

The Ürümchi riots of July 2009 and frantic media coverage which accompanied them brought the region of Xinjiang and its majority people the Uyghurs firmly beneath the gaze of the international community. Some were surprised that the riots should have happened at all, given that the region had been generally quiet since the Ghulja disturbances of 1997. Xinjiang historian James Millward characterised the event as ‘a departure from, not a culmination of, past patterns’ (2009: 349). Others were startled that the riot had taken place in historically calm Ürümchi. Yet for some who had conducted fieldwork in Xinjiang during the post-1997 ‘era of silence,’ the event lifted the lid on worsening Uyghur-Han relations during a period characterised by state crackdowns and reduced civil rights. Millward (2009: 351) links the intensity of the July violence to non-transparency of information, state censorship and rumour concerning the Shaoguan factory incident of 26th June. While misinformation and speculation evidently came into play, this article analyses the July 2009 riots, and the Shaoguan incident which provoked them, from another perspective. It illustrates the handling of these events as a microcosm of a broader pattern of ethnic discrimination and inequality; a pattern which has accelerated since the late nineties.

The Shaoguan factory incident

On examining the trigger for the peaceful protest in Ürümchi of 5 July 2009 – state handling of the Shaoguan factory incident - it emerges that Uyghur discontent derived from perceptions of ethnic discrimination. News reports suggest that the incident was at best mishandled and at worst trivialised by local authorities in Guangdong. First,
riot police failed to arrive on the scene for more than two and a half hours after Han workers stormed Uyghur workers' dormitories. The Guardian cited a local policeman as follows: ‘We got there late because it took a long time to assemble sufficient officers; when we arrived, there was blood everywhere and dozens of badly wounded people lying on the ground’ (Watts 2009; see also Jacobs 2009a). Following the incident, local authorities censored images showing violence against Uyghur workers, and instructed the local internet cafe to display the warning: ‘Do not spread rumours. Do not upload or spread information about the toy factory’ (Watts 2009). Security forces prevented the press from interviewing individuals who had been involved in the fighting, with police blocking entrance to the hospital rooms where two dozen workers were recovering from their injuries (Jacobs 2009a). Finally, though the Chinese government indicated that it had arrested Zhu Gangyuan, the man responsible for spreading the rumour which led to the attacks, it initially made no arrests. It took police ten days to detain anyone for murder or assault, while a local government spokesman, Wang Qinxin, shrugged the killings off as ‘a very ordinary incident’ (Watts 2009). The violence was further downplayed by the Vice Director of the Shaoguan Foreign Affairs Office, Chen Qihua, who stated: ‘The issue between Han and Uighur people is like an issue between husband and wife; we have our quarrels, but in the end, we are like one family’ (Jacobs 2009a). Only on 7th July – two days after the initial riot in Ürümchi and on the day of violent reprisals by Han - did Shaoguan police announce that they had made thirteen arrests relating to the killings. Ironically, these had been made on 5th July (Watts 2009; Kadeer 2009). It was not until 30th July that Guangdong officials announced that 15 people would face charges (Eimer 2009), and not until 10th October that two Han men were sentenced (Li 2009: 11). These sentences - one death sentence and the other life imprisonment - were
handed out ahead of the prosecution of those involved in the Ürümchi riot, reflecting the government’s acknowledgement of the link between the two events and perhaps also its new appreciation of the ethnic sensitivities involved.4

As a result of this series of mishandlings, the perception among Uyghurs in Xinjiang was that the Han perpetrators had been ‘allowed to get away with it.’ The failure of security forces to arrive promptly at the scene created a perception that authorities were slow to break up violence where victims were Uyghurs, not Han. Media censorship implied an official cover-up of the actual number of Uyghur victims. A Uyghur businessman from Ürümchi observed that the July riots might not have happened had the government given the Uyghurs an explanation about Shaoguan instead of trying to conceal the facts (Jackson-Han 2009a). Finally, the failure to arrest the perpetrators contrasted keenly with the rapidity with which arrests are routinely made in Xinjiang when a Uyghur is accused of ‘endangering state security’. In Ürümqi’s Saimachang District, an area populated mostly by southern migrant workers, Uyghurs described the event as ‘just one more example of institutionalised Han favouritism’ (Foster 2009c).5

Within days of the Shaoguan killings, Uyghurs in Ürümqi used email and internet communications to organise a protest (Watts 2009). Local and official PRC sources confirm that many Uyghurs arrived from south Xinjiang in the days preceding the demonstration (Millward 2009), while the internet was used to call on co-nationals to stage protests in other major cities (Jackson-Han 2009a).

The Ürümqi riots

So how did a peaceful protest turn into violent rioting? News reports and eyewitness accounts suggest that the state response to this demonstration differed from its earlier
response to the Shaoguan attacks. Local Uyghur sources informed Radio Free Asia that the protest had begun early on 5th July with around 1,000 people rallying in the Grand Bazaar in the Uyghur-dominated south-eastern district. One source, a demonstration organiser, stressed that participants had been told that the protest should not be violent (Jackson-Han 2009a). Beginning as a sit-down protest, it turned into a march through the Döngköwrük [Ch: Erdaoqiao] area. According to Millward (2009: 351-2), who cites online video evidence, and a statement by exile organisation Uyghur American Association (Jackson-Han 2009a), some protestors had carried the PRC flag to stress their loyalty to the Chinese state.6 They shouted slogans in Uyghur and Chinese, denouncing ethnic discrimination and demanding equal rights (Ramzy 2009). Eye witnesses describe a ‘peaceful, but noisy crowd’ gathered in the People’s Square by 7pm (Watts 2009).

Possibly the most credible account of the moment when violence erupted was provided by Peter, an English teacher living in Ürümchi with his Han wife. He recounted:

> The protesters’ route was blocked by the police, not in a menacing way, just as if to make it clear that they could go no further. The protesters stopped about 30m away for a few minutes, and then without warning some of them came forward and started throwing rocks at the police. The police tolerated this for maybe a couple of minutes, and when it became clear the throwing of stones wouldn’t stop, they charged (BBC News 2009b).7

While stone-throwing is clearly unacceptable, the subsequent police response appears to have been disproportionate to the offence. First, authorities made no effort to open dialogue with demonstrators about the Shaoguan incident (see Jackson-Han 2009a). Second, the methods deployed to deal with the stone throwers were extremely heavy-
handed. While Chinese officials insisted that police used only tear gas, stun grenades and high-pressure water guns (Foster and Moore 2009b), many Uyghur eye witnesses reported the use of unnecessary force. Some described how police had scattered, chased and beaten protesters, and used electroshock weapons (Jackson-Han 2009a). Others claimed that security forces had opened fire on Uyghurs. One woman named Gulmire passed to the BBC her sister’s eye-witness account, relayed to her from Ürümchi by phone. According to her, on 7th July police had chased and shot at a group of Uyghur students gathered near a park: ‘One by one the students fell to the ground. There was a lot of blood. My sister was upset and was crying. It’s a dark day for all Uighurs’ (BBC News 2009b).

It is hard to gauge from a distance the extent to which firepower was used. International students studying in Ürümchi at the time confirmed hearing crackles of gunfire after dark on 5th July. Media footage appeared to show a spray of bullet holes on the glass front of a Bank of China office (Buckley 2009b). One foreign correspondent reported that order was restored after dark by paramilitary police ‘equipped with tear gas and firing weapons’ (Macartney 2009b). The Chinese authorities themselves made admissions, confirming on 7th July that 7 patients undergoing treatment at the People’s Hospital had been shot (Foster and Moore 2009b). Meanwhile, a China Daily article of 20th July cited Nur Bekri, Chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur regional government, as stating that police had ‘resolutely’ shot and killed 12 rioters after firing guns into the air had no effect (China Daily 2009e).

One factor motivating the heavy police response appears to have been fear. The initial act of security forces was to remove the protest leaders from the People’s Square, a move criticised by a local Uyghur businessman, who claimed this resulted in protesters ‘acting aimlessly’ (Jackson-Han 2009a). Another Uyghur resident
referred to as Akumjia observed: ‘The police were scared and lost control’ (Branigan 2009d). A Guardian correspondent witnessing new demonstrations on 7th July by the wives of arrested Uyghur men similarly alluded to the fear and inexperience of young police officers:

A woman thrust photographs of her family at a helmeted officer, screaming at him to look at them, but the mood soon turned nasty and hands in the crowd reached out to hit and punch him. He had to be pulled out by fellow officers. Suddenly, the massed might of the Chinese authorities looked very much like one scared and vulnerable man – like many of the young officers stationed around the city (Branigan 2009b).

**The role played by Han nationalism**

An already dangerous situation of public order was exacerbated by a slanted representation of events in the domestic PRC media. Chinese state television showed partial images of a Uyghur mob kicking people on the ground and of victims identifiable as Han Chinese sat dazed and bloody in the street (*Taipei Times* 2009). In an especially emotive example, a correspondent for Chinese Central Television highlighted the youngest victim, a six-year-old Han girl ‘beaten while out shopping with her grandmother’ (BBC Monitoring 2009). A survey of print media coverage yields numerous case studies of dead or injured Han victims (often explicitly identified as such), but no accounts of police violence against Uyghur protestors (see, for example, *China Daily* 2009c). Meanwhile, photos of dead [Han] bodies were freely posted on the internet (Mudie 2009b). It does not require a leap of imagination to see that this distortion (intended or otherwise) may have catalysed retaliations by Han ‘vigilantes’ on 7th July, or to understand why Uyghur communities may have perceived the situation in this way. As one Uyghur university
student suggested: ‘I think the government and the media are instigating the [Han] Chinese to seek revenge; the government is trying to portray the conflict between itself and the Uyghurs as a conflict among the people’ (Mudie 2009b). 

Han nationalism was further suggested in comments made by Han police directly following the riots. One officer berated Western reporters during an official media tour on 7th July, demanding: ‘Why are you reporting on the Uyghurs? The Uyghurs chopped the heads off 100 Han Chinese’ (Foster 2009b). His words reflected a bias inappropriate of an officer deployed to defuse an ethnic riot, implying that he was himself mired in the ethnic conflict and, more worryingly, that some state representatives were involved – consciously or otherwise – in the spreading of atrocity stories.

The theme of ‘saving the nation’ subsequently emerged in the Han civilian show of strength that consumed the city on the 7th and 8th July, although this turn of events was given little coverage by PRC media. One armed group of Han residents tried to break through police lines to a Uyghur district while singing China’s national anthem and pledging to defend their country (Chan 2009). The mood was also reflected on the internet, where in one popular chat room frequented by overseas Chinese a netizen wrote: ‘We must spare no violence to unify our nation’ (Elegant 2009a). Patriotic rhetoric frequently became overtly racist, with Han residents shouting ‘Down with Uyghurs’ as they rampaged through the streets (BBC News 2009d).

By 8th July, the dominant discourse had repositioned itself to reflect a multi-ethnic (rather than Han) nationalism. Now, the mayor of Ürümchi, Jierla Yishamudin, characterised police action as a ‘battle of life and death to defend the unification of our motherland and to maintain the consolidation of all ethnic groups, a political
battle that’s fierce and of blood and fire’ (BBC Monitoring 2009, my emphasis).

When police in military fatigues and soldiers toting AK-47s fanned out with the goal of keeping Han and Uyghur communities apart, they too employed unifying rhetoric:

All morning the streets echoed with the stamp of police boots as tightly packed squads jogged up and down the streets shouting motivational chants: ‘Defend our motherland! Defend our people! Defend our country!’ (Foster 2009d; see also Oster and Dean 2009)

Loudspeakers mounted on military trucks blared: ‘Everybody please cooperate, please go home’ (Mudie 2009a). However, the damage had been done. As a police officer told the Han crowd ‘Please stand away. We are a nation united,’ one man replied: ‘Our brothers and sisters have been bloodied’ (Branigan 2009b). He referred not to the Zhonghua minzu da jiating – the ‘great family of Chinese nationalities’ - but to his brothers and sisters within the Han ethnic group. Subsequently, an anonymous piece published in China Daily on 9th July exhorted everyone to maintain calm:

It is incumbent upon members of any civilized society to believe in the rule of law […]
Everyone is equal before [the] law. That’s why family members, relatives and friends of the victims should not take the law into their hands, and [should] instead give the government time to conduct the investigations and trust it to deliver justice (China Daily 2009d).

**Differential handling of the Shaoguan and Ürümchi events**

The perceived intolerance shown to (largely) peaceful Uyghur protestors on 5th July in Ürümchi was widely contrasted by Uyghur observers with state handling of the Han violence on 26th June in Shaoguan. One eye-witness referred to as Ali demanded: ‘Why use armed force to suppress the protest in Ürümchi and not use the same force
when the incident at the toy factory in Guangdong happened?’ (BBC News 2009b). The initially muted police response to Han vigilantism on the 7th and 8th July was compared with treatment levelled at Uyghur protestors in the same way. One Uyghur eye witness commented: ‘When the Chinese came out with batons and clubs, there is no one to stop them. They are pretending to stop them, but they are not really strict; if the Uyghurs had come out with batons and clubs, they would immediately be fired upon’ (Mudie 2009b). Another female Uyghur interviewee noted: ‘If the government were as cruel towards them [the Hans] as they were towards the Uyghurs, they surely would be able to take care of the problem [Han vigilantism] in a moment’ (Mudie 2009b).

These observations were corroborated in some accounts given by foreign correspondents. The Guardian described on 7th July how large numbers of paramilitary police simply looked on as Han protesters forged through a Uyghur district, smashing shops and stalls, and made little early attempt to restrain them (Branigan 2009b). Agence France Press correspondents witnessed a Uyghur man being beaten and kicked by six Hans, as dozens of others yelled encouragement, before police moved in to stop it (BBC News 2009c). When police did begin to make arrests on 8th July, a large crowd of Han men reportedly faced off with security forces, furious that Hans were being arrested rather than Uyghurs (BBC news 2009c). Perhaps it is not too great a stretch to recall the violent outburst of Han nationalism that targeted the U.S. embassy in Beijing following the accidental bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade in 1999. On that occasion, the state allowed the demonstration to continue for two days before ordering protestors to desist as CCP leaders weighed up the comparative disadvantages of a) stopping the violence immediately and being accused by patriotic subjects of subordination to ‘foreign imperialist powers’; or b)
allowing the violence to continue indefinitely and risk damaging valued trade and diplomatic agreements with the U.S.

The riot targets: symbols of ethnic inequality

The way in which the riots played out also implied a link between Uyghur discontent and a shared perception of social (=ethnic) inequality. What were the physical targets of Uyghur rioters, and what do they symbolise? We know that attacks focused on:

1. Vehicles; around 1325 cars and buses were burned or smashed (Xinhua News Agency 2009b).
2. Shops, restaurants and houses; around 331 commercial and residential buildings were damaged (Xinhua News Agency 2009b).
3. Hotels and tourist spots.
5. Han civilian passers-by.

In addition, Xinjiang police chief Liu Yaohua stated that police had tightened security at power and natural gas companies and at TV stations (Lei, Cui and Hooi 2009). To an extent, all rioters attack shops, cars and buses as a means to express social or political discontent; however, the crucial distinction here was the specific targeting of items that symbolised comparative Han advantage. Cars, shops, businesses and upmarket real estate are generally owned or managed by well-off Han residents of Ürümchi. An example cited in both the PRC and the foreign press concerned one Guo Jianxin, owner of a car dealership for Chinese brand Geely, which was burned down by rioters wielding knives, clubs and stones (China Daily 2009c; Cui and Cui
Hancan [Han cuisine] restaurants symbolise the perceived ‘uncleanness’ of Han residents, i.e. their haram diet of pork and, by association, absence of religious belief. Hotels and tourist spots symbolise the comparative wealth and privilege of Han businessmen and Han tourists to Xinjiang, who, unlike most locals, can afford to patronise them. In another sense, restaurants and tourist spots may be seen to symbolise Han chauvinism. Uyghurs routinely state that pork can now be sold anywhere in Ürümchi and that Han residents no longer respect local religious requirements. Locals also complain that Han tourists to Xinjiang show little respect for Uyghur ethnic and religious heritage; for instance, they enter mosques wearing unsuitable clothing, or consume alcohol, shout and drop litter in religious shrines (Dawut 2007).

Most crucial and tragic of all, a minority of Uyghur rioters attacked passing civilians purely on the basis that they were Han, thus equating ordinary people directly with their government’s unpopular policies. These policies – and local disaffection towards them – are well documented. They include accelerated Han immigration (Ren and Yuan 2003; Ma 2003; Wang 2004); policies perceived to speed cultural erosion such as enforced secularisation of under-18s (Smith Finley 2007a) and the discontinuation of Uyghur-medium tuition (Dwyer 2005; Schluessel 2007; Uyghur Human Rights Project 2007); the failure to protect Uyghurs against employment discrimination and unemployment (Becquelin 2004); the proliferation of unequal standards of living (Bovingdon 2002; Wang 2004; Li 2009); Han exploitation of Xinjiang’s natural resources (Becquelin 2004); increased controls on religion (Fuller and Lipman 2004; Schluessel 2009); indiscriminate arrests and unfair trials (Amnesty International 2010); and a general sense of social and spatial
marginalisation. On this last point, a remark made by one Uyghur girl shortly after curfew was imposed in Ürümchi in July 2009 is significant:

I walked around the streets a while ago. There were police and soldiers in the streets. There are some Uyghurs, but no Chinese. Today, for the first time in my life, I have a feeling that Ürümchi is my hometown, because there were no Chinese in the streets. I am so glad (Jackson-Han 2009a).

It is important to note the resonances between the Ürümchi riots of July 2009 and the Lhasa riots of March 2008 in Tibet and subsequent clashes in Tibetan areas of Sichuan and Gansu, where there are similar issues concerning language and religious rights on the one hand and education and employment opportunities on the other.20

No rights without duties

As the title of this article suggests, the Uyghurs’ situation deteriorated rapidly after the 1997 Ghulja disturbances.21 I characterise that event elsewhere as an ‘ethno-political anti-climax’ (Smith Finley 2007b) – or the bleak culmination of the quest for an imagined Uyghur independence born in the early nineties. Yet in the eyes of the state and many of its Han subjects, the Ghulja disturbances seem to have represented a precocious attempt to break away from the state patron. In their wake formed a growing consensus among Han people that all Uyghurs (not just those who dreamed of independence) were ‘ingrates.’22 Article 4 of the Constitution of the PRC, while asserting that the state upholds nationality equality, makes clear that acts intended to divide the nationalities will not be tolerated:
All nationalities in the People’s Republic of China are equal. The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops a relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China’s nationalities. Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality are prohibited; any act which undermines the unity of the nationalities or instigates division is prohibited (1994: 12).

According to this logic, in daring to aspire to Xinjiang independence, Uyghurs had failed to fulfil their citizens’ duties of upholding nationality unity. This notion was underlined (not coincidentally, I would argue) in a policy reader authored by Wu Shimin, then Director of the Policy Research Centre of the State Ethnic Affairs Committee, in 1998:

> Each nationality must perform appropriate duties. There is no such thing as duties without rights or rights without duties […] Each nationality, at the same time as fully exercising their equal rights, must also shoulder the task of safeguarding nationality equality, nationality unity and national unification (Wu 1998: 7-8, my translation, my emphasis).

In other words, in order to enjoy nationality (=ethnic) equality in the PRC, individuals from all ethnic groups must promote nationality unity and protect national unification; correspondingly, those seeking to separate nationalities or territories forfeit their rights to that equality.23

The state’s response to events in 1997 was to further tighten controls on religion, to begin to phase out Uyghur-medium tuition and to speed up Han immigration, all conducted under the auspices of the Xibu da kaifa ['Developing the West'] campaign (Becquelin 2004). 1997 thus signalled a significant turning point in regional policy, whereby the state completely abandoned the conciliatory approach it
had adopted through the 1980s, and set out to ‘tame’ Xinjiang via the route of enforced assimilation. Following the initial violence in Ürümchi, the view of Uyghurs as ‘ingrates’ quickly surfaced among Han Chinese in and beyond the PRC. Han residents who had migrated to Xinjiang as part of the ‘Developing the West’ campaign were openly despising Uyghur fellow-citizens on the 6th May as ‘spongers’ (Foster 2009c). Terry, an Ürümchi-born Han working in Shanghai, told reporters: ‘The protesters make me so angry. The economic situation in Xinjiang is getting better and better’ (BBC News 2009b). A Han taxi-driver working in Ürümchi similarly complained: ‘They are really despicable - our lives had been so good, why would they have done such things?’ (BBC Monitoring 2009). Earlier, a Han worker who participated in the Shaoguan attack had expressed fury that the [alleged] factory rapes had gone unpunished and condemned this as ‘ethnic favouritism’ (Watts 2009).

Such comments reflect the prevalent view among Han Chinese that the government has already done enough for Uyghurs by pouring development subsidies into Xinjiang, building schools and clinics, and introducing affirmative action such as allowing minority couples to have more than one child or lowering university entry requirements for minority nationalities (see also Branigan 2009d; Graham-Harrison 2009).

**Re-activation of negative stereotypes**

Negative stereotypes lying below the surface since the 1997 Ghulja disturbances - following which it became illegal to slander another ethnic group - burst forth during and after the Shaoguan and Ürümchi events. Shaoguan locals retrospectively employed stereotypes to describe Uyghur factory workers. A Han female worker
referred to as Ma explained: ‘At first, we thought they were fun because in the evenings they danced and it was very lively; but then many others arrived. The more of them there were the worse relations became’ (Watts 2009). I often heard this view articulated by Han Chinese while conducting fieldwork in Xinjiang in 1995-6. Respondents would praise ethnic minorities for their ‘friendly’ nature and their flair for song and dance. However, this was invariably followed by comments about the ‘primitive’ habits of Uyghurs and warnings to be on my guard. A Han shopkeeper told reporters: ‘The Xinjiang people have a low level of civilisation; they ordered beer and refused to pay for it. They pushed and shoved people who passed them on the street, and they chased and harassed the girls all the time’ (Watts 2009). This recalls popular stereotypes, circulating among Han Chinese in the mid-90s, which painted Uyghur men as sexual predators.24 Uyghurs reacted with similar anger to the (rare) sight of a Uyghur girl walking down the street with a Han boyfriend, with the act constructed in terms of (Uyghur) national dishonour and betrayal. In this way, ethnic identities and transgression of ethnic boundaries are often physicalised and perceived in terms of protection or domination of the female body.25 Some post-riot stories contained the detail of female bodily humiliation, as when a Han security guard claimed that Han women had been ‘stripped on the street’ (Foster and Moore 2009a). Of particular interest was the analogy drawn by Räbiyä Qadir, leader of the WUC, between the Shaoguan murders and the 1955 mob murder of African-American Emmett Till. Till was alleged to have made a vulgar pass at a white woman, and his white killers were subsequently acquitted of his murder (Kadeer 2009).

Another stereotype characterised Uyghurs as ‘savage’ and ‘barbaric’. Yao Chengqing, a 42-year-old Han shop owner reportedly attacked by ten Uyghurs, emphasised his attackers’ quick resort to physical violence: ‘We never even spoke a
word to them; they just attacked, beating us and screaming “We hate the Han, we want to kill the Han”’ (Foster 2009c). A long-term Han resident named Fu, aged 38, pointed to a scar on his arm, observing: ‘We’re used to it already; they’re uncivilized’ (Ramzy 2009). A third Han (who had himself taken to the streets with a homemade weapon in the form of a table leg) claimed: ‘Didn’t you hear, these Uighurs they chopped the heads off a hundred Han and left their bodies in the streets; they killed even the small children, they are barbarians’ (Foster 2009c).

A final stereotype painted Uyghurs as Muslim extremists, a newer image invoked in Chinese state discourses since 2001 and the launch of the global ‘War on Terror’ (see Millward 2004: 10-14). As related by one Han interviewee:

I saw a group of Muslim people who had caught two women, hit them until they fell to the ground and then attacked them with knives […] I saw hundreds of Muslims assembled in one place. They were looking in the crowd to identify anyone who is Han Chinese. Then they would attack and kill innocent passers-by. […] They were filled with animosity and hatred against anyone who is not Muslim and does not belong to them (BBC News 2009a; see also Foster 2009c) [author’s emphasis].

Uyghur residents were prone to similar exaggerations. One young woman insisted that 400 Uyghur women had been raped in Shaoguan (Foster 2009b). In this reverse scenario, sexual violation of Uyghur women symbolises Han domination, a theme that emerges strongly in my research on Uyghur hostess (sanpei xiaojie) culture.26 Other rumours alleged that 4,000 Chinese factory workers had murdered 600 Uyghurs, chopped them into small pieces, and thrown their body parts in the dustbin (Foster 2009b; Foster 2009c).
The July riots: a second turning point?

The Chinese authorities now face an enormous challenge if they are to re-establish long-term peace. Some Han residents lost confidence after the riots, and feel too frightened to continue living in Xinjiang (China Daily 2009c; Foster 2009c). Some victims received ‘psychological intervention treatment’. Others translated their fear into aggression. One Han female ‘vigilante’ proclaimed: ‘We can’t live like this anymore, we lock our doors at night and live in fear now; the Uyghurs will learn that the Han people can also join forces’ (Foster 2009c). Even Han residents who previously enjoyed a *modus vivendi* with Uyghur residents were thoroughly shaken. 45 year-old Zhang Xiangying explained:

Before this happened I thought the Uyghur and the Han were one family; my neighbour was a Uyghur, but now I feel this coldness between us. When they attacked I begged a Uyghur woman to open her door to help me, but she refused. I don't think I would ever help a Uyghur again (Foster 2009d).

A young woman named Dong, aged 24, though more positive, underlined the constraints on future contact:

When I was young, many Uyghurs were my neighbours and classmates. Nothing like this ever happened. We had very good relations; now my Han female friends and I feel a bit scared when we see Uyghur men because we were all hurt by them. I’ll still be nice to the friends I know well, but I may feel scared by strange Uyghur men (Branigan 2009d).

By September 2009, Han anger had turned on the Chinese authorities. Following a series of alleged syringe attacks in Ürümchi, thousands of Han residents protested the lack of public safety. Some called for Wang Lequan, Communist Party
Secretary of Xinjiang, to step down, and there were chants of ‘The government is useless’ (Moore 2009). Initially, only Li Zhi, Party Secretary for Ürümqi, was dismissed from his post. This central decision was interpreted by overseas Chinese scholar Li Cheng as a strategy to protect Wang Lequan, since ‘firing a Politburo member would send a message they do not want to send’ (i.e. call Party authority into question) (Bradsher and Yang 2009). Nevertheless, Wang was removed the following April in a move described as ‘very smart’ by one local Han journalist: ‘The central government has to remove this chip on the people’s shoulder before July 5 [the first anniversary of the riots]’ (Wong and Ansfield 2010).

In Shaoguan, Uyghur-Han relations were similarly strained following the factory incident. Uyghur workers were relocated to dormitories more than seven miles away and redeployed in another factory. Because they dared not enter the city, Muslim restaurants were hired to supply them with noodles. Uyghur kebab sellers moved out (Watts 2009; Jacobs 2009a). By February 2010, none of the 800 Uyghur workers remained at the factory. Some had found work elsewhere in the Pearl River Delta, some had migrated on to other provinces, while some had returned to Xinjiang (Mudie 2010).

**Need to address underlying issues**

The Ürümqi riots 2009 reflected a widespread sense of expired hope. One Uyghur resident referred to as Alim observed: ‘If we speak up, we get killed. If we don’t speak up, we will be wiped out as a people in a few decades.’ As Becquelin noted, those words indicated ‘an almost suicidal force’ driving Uyghur protesters (cited in
Elegant 2009a). President Hu Jintao demonstrated that he took the event seriously when he left the G8 Summit in Italy to return to Beijing on 7th July (Foster 2009d; BBC News 2009c). Yet early government analysis of the unrest followed an established pattern in blaming ‘outside forces’, ‘exiled separatists’ and ‘terrorists linked to Al-Qaeda’ (China Daily 2009a; China Daily 2009b; Wu 2009; Xinhua News Agency 2009b; Zhao and Cui 2009), and refrained from examining the underlying issues. The state launched a new ‘Strike Hard’ crackdown, detaining 2000 people in 786 ‘troubled areas’, which continued into 2010 (China Daily 2009f; Jacobs 2009b; Wong 2009c; Xinhua News Agency 2010), promised execution for individuals convicted of murder, and introduced new curbs on religious practice, travel and freedom of speech (Jackson-Han 2009a; Jacobs 2009b; BBC News 2009c). In January 2010, the government increased public security spending in Xinjiang by 88 per cent, and in March pledged a further 600 million yuan for the armed police (Wong 2010; Cui 2010b). These are all measures sure to stoke further discontent, since they intensify existing policies that are extremely unpopular.

However, with the 60th anniversary of the PRC celebrations (1st October 2009) safely concluded (cf. Macartney 2009a), there were finally signs that Chinese officials had begun to address the root causes. In October-November 2009, a group of Chinese officials - the Team of Investigation and Research on Xinjiang - spent several weeks in the region gathering data towards a special meeting on Xinjiang’s economic development (Li 2009: 15). Following that meeting, held in Beijing on 29th and 30th March, Vice Premier Li Keqiang and Zhou Yongkang of the Standing Committee of the Politburo called for trilateral collaboration between central ministries, designated provinces and municipalities outside of Xinjiang (i.e. in China proper), and Xinjiang’s regional government to build Xinjiang into a ‘moderately well-off society’ within ten
years. While the focus on economic development is not new, the article went on to refer (albeit obliquely) to the problem of ethnic inequality:

Since last October [2009], more than 500 officials from 64 departments have been sent to towns, villages, schools and companies in Xinjiang to inspect social situations and collect people’s suggestions, amid efforts to study how to improve the livelihoods of residents and promote ethnic equality and unity (China Daily 2010b, my emphasis; see also China Daily 2010a). 29

This point is key. Without economic and social equality between ethnic groups (or at least a significant narrowing of the income and status gap), there can be no lasting harmony in Xinjiang. True to its word, central government announced in May 2010 that the recipients of this new aid programme would not be Ürümchi or Qaramay (rich cities with majority Han populations) but impoverished areas inhabited mainly by Uyghurs. The scheme will twin eastern and central provinces and municipalities with financial muscle (Guangdong, Beijing) with the least developed areas in Xinjiang, e.g. Khotān and Qāshqār (Cui 2010a). In three related developments in 2010, the state moved to ease those on low income. At a regional work conference held in May, it was decided to introduce state support for the unemployed (especially jobless families) and to provide social pension insurance to elderly people in rural areas by 2012 (Beijing Review, 2010). The regional Department of Human Resource and Social Security announced in July that monthly wages paid to workers had been increased by 24.6 per cent on average, producing a new minimum monthly wage of between 640 and 960 yuan. While no explicit reference was made to the ethnic income gap, it is clear that many - if not most - of those likely to benefit will be Uyghurs. 30 Finally, living allowances for rural boarding school students from poor
families (a scheme rolled out between 2003 and 2006) were raised in September 2010 from 500 yuan to 1000 yuan per academic year for primary school boarders, and from 750 yuan to 1250 yuan for junior high school boarders (Global Times 2010).

Adjustments have also begun to be made to language policy. On 1st May 2010, Xinhua announced that henceforth all candidates for government posts in Xinjiang must be able to communicate in both Chinese and the local language. Those who cannot meet these requirements will have to complete a 3-month language training program. Kang Tingfeng, spokesman for Xinjiang’s human resources department, stated: ‘The regulation will enable officials to better serve the people, encourage the learning of languages and promote exchange between people of different ethnic groups.’ This constitutes a major turning point. Previously, Han officials were required to learn a local language only in Khotän and Qäshqär (where Uyghurs form a strong majority), and Uyghurs have long complained of an embedded disrespect among Han towards the Uyghur language.31 Ma Pinyan of the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences conceded that the regulation was ‘significant’ (China Daily 2010d; see also Blanchard 2010).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to cite Uyghur economics professor, Ilham Tohti, who in his final blog before being arrested in Beijing on 7th July 2009 wrote:

If everything were working so well, why did so many people suddenly come out and riot? […] My message to the Xinjiang government is, “You should know that there is no peace without equal development between Han immigrants and native Uyghurs …
Similarly, there is no stability in the Uyghur region without freedom of speech” […] My message to the central government is, “Don’t listen only to what the local government officials in Xinjiang say—listen to the people. […] This will be very helpful for protecting the unity of the nation”” (Jackson-Han 2009b).

Reading this, I was reminded of a Uyghur saying circulating in Xinjiang this past decade: ‘Doppisini äkäl desäm, bāshini akelidu’ (‘When I ask him to bring his doppa [embroidered skull cap], he brings me his head’). It highlights the cumulative distortion of central policies for nationalities as they migrate first from Beijing to Ürümchi, and then from Ürümchi to Qāshqār. The assumption is that freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution become less observable the further you move away from the centre, while minority policies become increasingly repressive.

The government has begun to make some positive changes. Other policy adjustments one might hope to see in the future include the introduction of a system to limit Han migration to Xinjiang, perhaps akin to those controlling immigration flows in other countries. This would recognise the region’s special historical and cultural circumstances, while easing pressure on local resources, economy and ethnic relations. The effective implementation of equal opportunities legislation in Xinjiang - and indeed across the PRC - might work towards outlawing ethnic (and other types of) discrimination in employment. The reintroduction of language choice in education and relaxation of controls on religion would underpin a policy of mutual tolerance and respect. Encouragingly, the March 2010 meeting in Beijing, in addition to acknowledging socio-economic inequalities, also recognised the need to uphold the Party’s ethnic and religious policies if social stability is to be maintained (China Daily 2010c). To some large degree, the solutions lie in policy implementation.
The irony in continuing to treat all Uyghurs as ‘ungrateful’ would-be separatists is that many Uyghurs are now convinced that a future as a genuinely autonomous part of China – for example, within a Chinese federation - could be better than independence. Thus, if Beijing granted Uyghurs the freedom to decide and implement their own regional policies governing language, education, culture, religion, economy and environment (while retaining central control of national defence), it might find that most Uyghurs would willingly - even happily - remain part of the motherland. If China desires her minority nationalities to fulfil their duties within the multi-ethnic state, she must first give them the right to govern their local affairs.

1 The Ürümchi riots 2009 were covered in detail by British, American and mainland European media as well as by news agencies in the Middle East and Taiwan. All may potentially be perceived by Chinese spectators to be in one way or another hostile to PRC interests, as witnessed by the many opinion pieces on ‘Western media bias’ which appeared in the domestic Chinese press following the event and its reportage (for a representative example, see Huang 2009). In forming the views I present in this article, I have tried wherever possible to consult news reports emanating from both within and without the PRC, and to frame these with reference to relevant scholarly work. In no instance do I rely solely on statements issued by any one single source. I acknowledge that violent acts were committed by both Uyghurs and Han, and by both individuals and the armed forces, during this tragic event. In the end, my arguments and conclusions are based on a strong desire to see lasting tolerance, understanding and peace in the region.

2 There were previously three demonstrations in Ürümchi, one of which ended in violence. In 1985, university students demonstrated against nuclear testing, Han immigration and family planning policy (see Millward 2004: 8); in 1988, students protested against discriminatory graffiti found at Xinjiang University (Millward 2004: 8); and in 1989, a joint Hui/Uyghur protest was organised against the (later withdrawn) book Xing fengsu [Sexual Customs], which contained insulting misrepresentations of Islam (Millward 2004: 8; Dillon 2004: 60-61; Gladney 2004: 232, 314-5). During this latter protest, cars, motorbikes and windows were smashed and some 200 people injured; no-one was killed.

3 For detailed accounts of this incident in which at least two Uyghur workers were killed by Han co-workers in a toy factory in Guangdong, see Millward 2009; Hess 2009; Hu 2009; Buckley 2009a; Watts 2009; Leow and Fairclough 2009; Jacobs 2009a; ABC News 2009; Mudie 2010.

4 12 convicts were sentenced to death later in October 2009 for their part in the Ürümchi riots; all but one had Uyghur names (Wong 2009c).

5 Uyghur exile organisations were quick to identify the mishandling of the Shaoguan incident as the direct cause of the Ürümchi clash. Alim Seytoff, a spokesman for World Uyghur Congress (WUC) accused police of doing too little too late to stop the factory violence: “The mob in Guangdong beat
and killed Uyghurs with impunity; the security forces didn't arrest anyone and did absolutely nothing” (Elegant 2009a).

6 This author scanned the internet for still images of Uyghur protestors holding the PRC flag, but was unable to locate any. Available images showed a) Han vigilantes in Ürümchi parading the PRC flag (see for example: http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2009/09/03/china-protest.html ); or b) Uyghur exiles defacing the PRC flag (see Uyghurs in Istanbul burning the PRC flag at: http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2009/07/scores_die_in_china_as_muslim.html; and Uyghurs on a World Uyghur Congress rally in Munich trampling the PRC flag at: http://www.daylife.com/photo/0eWL3kf8TnfEs).

7 This differs from the account given by Dilxat Raxit, speaking for exile organisation World Uyghur Congress (WUC), who told reporters that protests had been peaceful until authorities began to forcibly remove protestors from the square (Foster 2009a).

8 This claim was also made by Uyghur exile organisations. The Uyghur American Association (UAA) reported the deployment of regular police, anti-riot police, special police, and People's Armed Police (PAP), and cited unnamed witness accounts to claim that some Uyghur protestors were shot dead (Jackson-Han 2009a; BBC news 2009b). Dilxat Raxit of the WUC claimed that military forces had arrived before the municipal government building with machine guns after the crowd refused to disperse (Foster and Moore 2009b).

9 Interviews with two British undergraduates, April and August 2010.

10 Chinese authorities had also admitted shooting at Tibetan protestors in Sichuan Province in March 2008 (Beck and Buckley 2008).

11 Five photographs of the violence, three showing burning vehicles and two showing bloodied victims (visibly Han) lying inert, were released at a press conference held by government officials in Ürümchi on 7th July, and uploaded onto the Xinhua News Agency website. These are still posted at time of writing, see http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/07/content_11668474.htm. The opinion piece carried by China Daily on 11th July referred to how “we have seen the horrifying images on the television and internet of how terror was inflicted with the indiscriminate slaying of innocent people” (Huang 2009). On 5th August, a photo exhibition sponsored by the regional Communist Party Committee and government opened in Ürümchi, which, according to Xinhua, “displayed how rioters committed crimes of murder, looting, arson and robbery” (Xinhua News Agency 2009a).

12 This issue was later capitalised on by Räbiyä Qadir, leader of the WUC in exile (Kadeer 2009; see also Mudie 2009a).

13 There is nonetheless a small Uyghur middle class forming in Ürümchi, which expresses a contrasting ethnic identity through the selective consumption of foodstuffs, music and real estate (Erkin 2009).

14 What the foreign media failed to pick up on but was made crystal clear in PRC reports was that Guo was in fact an ethnic Hui; state media could thus portray the event as instigated by bad elements against people of all ethnicities, not just against the Han. It is possible that the rioters believed Guo was Han, as many Hui bear a physical resemblance to Han. However, the attack could also have been deliberate, given that there is a long history of tensions in Xinjiang between Uyghurs and Hui, with the latter mistrusted as ‘newcomers’ to the region and potential allies of the Han.

15 This was not the case in the past; first-generation Han migrants to Xinjiang adapted to local customs, giving up pork and learning the Uyghur language (see Smith 2002).

16 On the Friday following the riots in Ürümchi, Chinese authorities closed many of the city’s mosques, but were forced to re-open the Yanghang and White mosques after hundreds of Uyghur worshippers gathered at the gates. At the Döngköwrük mosque, which remained closed, a young man told Reuters: “We feel we are being insulted. This is our mosque. But we are not allowed in, while the y let in non-believers” (Branigan 2009c).

17 According to one account by a Han student, this attitude was also reflected in the response of medical staff to the influx of wounded civilians: “In the hospital, I saw a Han man arrive with lots of blood over his shirt, but the Uyghur staff paid him no attention” (Branigan 2009a).

18 The changing balance in population composition has led to aggravated Han chauvinism. A Tatar tourist guide from Ürümchi stated in interview in 2004 that Uyghurs were now regarded as “little more than animals” by Han residents.

19 These underlying causes of discontent were picked up in many press reports covering the riots (see especially Becquelin 2009, Wong 2009a and Wong 2009b on failing ethnic policies, Hille 2009 on social inequalities, and Foster 2009 on ethnic discrimination). A PRC government White Paper released in September 2009 pointed out how Xinjiang’s regional GDP in 2008 was 86.4 times higher than that of 1952, yet went on to state that the per-capita net income of farmers (who are predominantly ethnic Uyghurs) was only 3,503 yuan compared with a per-capita disposable income of 11,432 yuan.
among urban residents (who are mainly ethnic Han) (Xinhua News Agency 2009b). See the full text at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-09/21/content_12090477.htm. The ethnic characteristics of the income gap were also acknowledged obliquely in the anonymous commentary released by China Daily on 9th July, which stated: “People should respect life. The innocent should never be targeted. Every person, regardless of his or her ethnicity, should aim for a higher income and a better life” (China Daily 2009d, my emphasis).

20 Riot targets in Lhasa included government offices, cars, Han shops and businesses, a police station, a mosque, and passers-by of Han and other nationalities (see Beck and Buckley 2008; Watts 2008; Grammaticus 2010). It is possible that the ‘other nationalities’ targeted were individuals who physically resembled Han, or else Hui Muslims. Like Han Chinese, Hui are perceived to be newcomers to Tibet and Xinjiang. For the same reason, the mosque attacked was likely a Hui mosque.

21 For an authoritative account of this event, see Millward 2004: 16-17. In brief, several hundred Uyghurs demonstrated after two taliplar (religious students) were arrested for ‘illegal religious activities.’ Protestors called for ethnic equality and Uyghur independence, and expressed religious sentiments such as ‘We have only one God, and he is Allah.’ Anti-riot police reportedly deployed dogs, tear gas, fire hoses, beatings and firepower, while riot targets included vehicles, police and Han residents.

22 For a recent example, see Elegant (2008), who cites a 27-year-old Han businessman based in the southern oasis of Khotän as stating that local Uyghur residents ‘should be grateful for the economic development of recent years’.

23 Wu has been Vice Chairman of the State Ethnic Affairs Committee since 2003. On 23rd July 2009, he denied that the government’s ethnic minority policies were the root cause of the Ürümchi riots, but conceded that “improvements might be made when necessary” and that “local governments might need to do a better job carrying out the policies” (Wong 2009b).

24 Sexualised stereotypes are common among Han representations of minority nationalities (see Gladney 2004), and are also reflected in internet nationalism. In September 2009, Han Chinese protesting against the documentary film The 10 Conditions of Love (about Uyghur exile leader, Räbiyä Qadir) hacked into Taiwan’s Kaohsiung Film Festival website and replaced its usual content with a digitally altered photograph of Qadir with the Dalai Lama and a caption accusing the two of sexual promiscuity (Child 2009).

25 Millward (2009: 350) suggests that the Shaoguan incident, sparked by a rumour that two Han female workers had been raped by Uyghur male co-workers, resulted not only from economic issues but also from cultural misunderstandings and what he terms ‘gender anxiety’. An early report on the Ürümchi riots, carried by Beijing’s China Daily, stated that the Shaoguan incident ‘had been triggered by a sex assault by a Uygur worker toward a Han female worker’, although a subsequent article published later that day revised this wording to ‘allegedly triggered by a sexual assault’ (China Daily 2009a).

26 Uyghur hostesses ‘accompany’ male Han clients in karaoke bars and other leisure venues. They are paid to entertain in a variety of ways, usually singing, dancing, smoking, drinking, eating, laughing at clients’ jokes, and so on. Depending on the individual, the role may involve heavy petting or even full sexual relations.


28 Chinese officials initially deflected suggestions that ethnic policies were failing (see for example Wong 2009b). Guangdong Party Secretary Wang Yang was alone in stating to the foreign press on 30th July: “The [ethnic] policies themselves will definitely need adjustments […] We have to adjust to the actual situation. China is a multi-ethnic society…” (Pomfret 2009). Conversely, many ordinary Han Chinese from China proper who contacted Radio Free Asia’s Mandarin and Cantonese call-in shows suggested that the Chinese government reflect on its own mistakes (Radio Free Asia 2009).

29 The government has adopted a similar approach to tackling unrest in Tibet, although the sensitive issue of ethnic inequality is again intimated. President Hu Jintao, speaking at the fifth meeting on the work of Tibet in Beijing (January 18-20, 2010), spoke of the need to increase the income of ‘farmers and herdspeople’ (for the most part ethnic Tibetans) to match the national average, and to extend public services to rural areas (inhabited mainly by Tibetans) as well as urban areas (inhabited mainly by Han) (China Daily 2009c).

30 New quantitative research shows that Uyghurs currently earn 52% less than Hans in the private sector and 31% less overall (anon., submitted article reviewed by the author for The China Journal).

31 Following the Ürümchi riots of July 2009, ethnic minority officers were drafted in from outside the city in order to interrogate detainees in the Uyghur language (Lei, Cui and Hooi 2009; Jackson-Han 2009a).