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Four generations of Uyghurs: the shift towards ethno-political ideologies among Xinjiang’s youth.

Introduction

I first came across the Uyghurs in 1988 while studying Chinese in Beijing. Four years later, in June 1992, I returned to the city and had an interesting conversation with a young Uyghur migrant worker. Under cover of darkness, he informed me that Uyghurs were being provided with bombs “from the outside” with which they would fight the Han Chinese. August 1991 had seen the break-up of the former USSR and the establishment of independent Central Asian states adjacent to Xinjiang. Following these significant events, there was much talk of the so-called “contamination effect” (the idea that independence movements in former Soviet Central Asia might spread across the border into Xinjiang). News from the outside world had been flooding into Xinjiang since its opening in the mid-eighties, and many Uyghurs had relatives in the newly independent states. Western observers began to wonder what would be the effect on the Uyghur cousins on the Chinese side of the border. It was in this context and climate that I decided to go to Xinjiang to research modern Uyghur identities.

One year was spent in the region between September 1995 and September 1996 conducting fieldwork among Uyghurs in the regional capital of Ürümchi in the north, and in the southern oases of Kucha, Aqsu, Qäšqär, and Xotân. Determined to gather information “straight from the horse’s mouth,” I adopted an ethnographic approach to research and spent the first six months in the field learning basic Uyghur so that I might converse with respondents in their mother tongue. The core of the empirical data comprises informal conversations with Uyghurs of both sexes, of
various ages and social groups, and from various localities, in addition to qualitative observations of practices and interactions among Uyghurs and of interactions between Uyghurs, Han Chinese, and other minority nationalities in Xinjiang. In this respect, a basic assumption has been made that meanings are sustained in processes of social interaction.

I was aware that Uyghur identities had traditionally been diverse, depending on geographical area and social group. I therefore decided to select key informants from a number of different oases in the north and south, as well as from different walks of life. I also tried to choose an equal number of males and females, as well as Uyghurs from different age groups. In addition to these key informants, I gathered supplementary data from one-off conversations with diverse individuals I met along the way. Key informants eventually included intellectuals, students, secondary school pupils, middle school teachers, petty entrepreneurs, unemployed people, a nurse, a prefectoral Communist Party Secretary, and a number of peasants. They came from Ürümchi, from the oases of Kucha, Xotän, Qäšqär, Aqsu, Atuš, Ghulja, and Turpan, and also from the Aqsu countryside. For three months in summer 1996, I was fortunate enough to be able to conduct participant observation while living in several Uyghur homes.

The nature of the separatist movement in Xinjiang in the nineties

The Uyghur independence movement of the nineties is something of a new phenomenon. Since the late eighties and early nineties, Uyghur identity has experienced radical changes. This decade has seen both the rapid strengthening of the Uyghur national identity in urban areas and the development of its ethno-political element among certain social groups. Social and political instability in Xinjiang has to
a certain extent mirrored growing unrest in Tibet since 1987. The protagonists of both movements hail from the younger generation and claim to be socially and economically disadvantaged compared with Han Chinese who have immigrated to their regions.ii So far, separatist ideologies are more prolific in urban than in rural areas of Xinjiang, suggesting that the emergence and development of Uyghur ethno-nationalism is, in part, linked to the steady increase in Han immigration to Xinjiang’s towns over the past forty years. Modern Uyghur separatism also appears to have been fuelled by certain significant domestic and international events and trends.

Peaceful demonstrations in the late eighties against racial discrimination and socio-economic inequalities gave way first to rioting that coincided with the 1989 pro-democracy movement in China proper,iii and then to violent riots in south Xinjiang in the summer of 1990. The Baren riots, as they came to be known, began with a speech in a mosque, and culminated in a mass protest against CCP birth control policy, nuclear testing, and the export of natural resources.iv For the first time since 1949, the rioters called for the establishment of an Eastern Turkestan state. The Chinese media claimed that young men involved were members of an “Islamic Holy War Force” financed by local Muslims. Other sources reported that Afghani mujaheddin (Islamic warrior) units across the border had supplied them with arms. This was the first link made between the emerging separatist movement in Xinjiang and increasingly popular Islamic fundamentalist movements in countries across the border.

Since that time, the independence movement has gradually increased in militancy. In February 1992, some separatists turned to terrorism and carried out bomb attacks in Ürümchi, Ghulja, Xotän, Chöchäk, and Bortala.v Further bombs exploded in the region’s towns during the years that followed.vi In February 1997, three bus bombs were detonated in Ürümchi, planned to coincide with the last day of
official mourning for Deng Xiaoping’s death, and causing large numbers of anti-riot police and armed soldiers to be deployed on the streets. A spokesman for Uyghur nationalists calling himself Sagari Tarim (“wanderer from Tarim”) publicly affirmed that some of “those supporting the creation of an Islamic state in Xinjiang” were turning to anti-Chinese terror. He said that, in the current situation, this was the only way for Uyghurs to oppose the Han police and military. Then, in March of the same year, Uyghur nationalists took their cause to Beijing for the first time, where a time bomb exploded on a bus on Xidan Street. A Uyghur dissident group in Turkey subsequently claimed that the attack had been perpetrated by exiled Uyghur separatists who came into the region from Qazaqstan.

Starting in 1993, separatists turned their anger on Uyghur leaders and cadres. Previously, they had targeted only Han Chinese cadres, police, and military. From this time on, so-called “collaborators” among Xinjiang’s Uyghur-nationality cadres were no longer tolerated and came under continual threat of assassination. In July 1993, there was an assassination attempt on Amudun Niyaz, Chairman of the Xinjiang Regional People’s Government. Then, in early May 1996, a gang of eleven Uyghur separatists attacked the rural home of a local Uyghur leader in Kucha. They threw grenades through the windows, then cut out the tongues and cut the throats of the leader, his wife, his younger brother, and his brother’s wife. The Chinese government subsequently issued Document 7, which contained urgent recommendations that large numbers of Han Chinese be moved into the region to stabilise unrest, that the Qorla-Qäšqär railway be completed within three years to facilitate Han immigration, and that Uyghurs lose the right to study abroad. Also in May 1996, Arongxan Aji, an imam in Qäšqär and chairman of the regional China Islamic Association, and his eldest son were attacked by two armed Uyghurs while on their way to a mosque in the
small hours. The imam stood accused of having links with the Chinese government that were “too close.”

Suicide bombings became a new feature of the movement when the aforementioned gang of Uyghur separatists martyred themselves in Kucha after being surrounded by Han Chinese soldiers. There was also a substantial increase in the theft of firearms and explosives from Chinese military installations in Xinjiang in the same year. This, in addition to the continuing supply of foreign-made arms, suggested that separatists were preparing for guerrilla war in the event of unrest in the wake of Deng Xiaoping’s death. Finally, in the most serious disturbances since 1949, mobs of young Uyghurs in Ghulja targeted not only Han Chinese police and military but for the first time murdered Han civilians and burned their bodies on the streets during the Ili riots of March 1997.

The increasing anxiety of the Chinese authorities concerning the step-up in Uyghur violence has been reflected in their political decisions as well as in CCP discourse in the nineties. Certain changes in policy were especially telling. In August 1990, and in the wake of the Baren riots, a meeting of editors in Lhasa decided to impose tighter control on the media. From this time on, factual reporting (previously often sympathetic to ethnic minorities) was replaced by properly vetted articles and editorials attacking separatism (Dillon 1995: 29). Five years later, in October 1995, the Central Military Commission agreed that, in the event of “an emergency situation of nationality unrest,” troops from southern Xinjiang’s Military District could be deployed to the scene without reporting to Beijing first for approval. In another rather ominous development in 1997, Xinjiang became the first region in the country to computerise information about its population, replete with personal details and
photographs of each individual. It would now be even harder for Uyghur separatists to slip through the net.

The second half of the nineties has heralded the return of Maoist rhetoric in the government’s fight against separatism. In 1996, CCP propaganda began for the first time to lean towards the extremism that had characterised the Cultural Revolution almost thirty years before. In April, a Party meeting stressed “the need to fully mobilise the masses of all nationalities in Xinjiang...so that a tight net of justice spread jointly by the people and the public security officers will pin criminals down in the vast sea of the people’s war.” Such rhetoric was commonplace throughout 1996 and 1997 and became increasingly dramatic. By May 1996, the fight against secessionism had been identified in the Chinese media as a class question: “Our struggle against ethnic separatism is a life-and-death class struggle and there is no compromise or concession whatsoever.” In re-framing the situation in terms of class, the Chinese government perhaps hoped to deflect attention away from the actual causes of the turbulence. Japan’s Kyodo News Service was to write later that incitement to class struggle had been “the call sign for the violent methods of ideological thought control used during the 10 chaotic years of China’s Cultural Revolution.”

From May 1997 onwards, attempts to play down or simply hide incidents of unrest were accompanied by a grim development in anti-separatist tactics. In a further echo of the Cultural Revolution, “rectification work teams” were now sent to Xinjiang’s villages to “carry out propaganda face to face with the masses.” Maoist rhetoric became still more extreme as Amudun Niyaz, chairman of the Regional People’s Congress Standing Committee, said of the summer assassinations of two Uyghur cadres by Uyghur separatists: “We must differentiate fragrant flowers from
poisonous weeds and eradicate poisonous weeds to enable fragrant flowers to bloom more brilliantly." xix Criticism and denunciation meetings were held throughout the townships of Ili prefecture, and literary and art teams were dispatched to stage “educational performances” concerning the February riots, religions, and the law. xx

According to the United Political Council of the Uyghur Organisations of Central Asia, this latest phase of religious and ethnic suppression had, by November 1997, plunged one in ten families in Xinjiang into mourning for a relative arrested, persecuted, or executed. xxi

**Reasons for the strengthening of Uyghur national identity and the emergence of separatist ideologies in the late eighties/early nineties**

So why has Uyghur national identity strengthened so rapidly since the late eighties? And why is it that calls for secession have surfaced only since the beginning of the nineties? These developments can be attributed to certain internal and external factors. The internal factors stem from the growth of the Han Chinese immigrant population in urban areas of Xinjiang. According to estimates based on an official Chinese survey, Han Chinese immigrants totalled 6,424,400 persons in 1996 while local nationalities (including Uyghurs) totalled 10,468,500 persons, or 61.97% of the region’s total population. xxii Continued Han immigration to Xinjiang has had three visible effects on life in the region. Firstly, as the number of Han Chinese has grown, pressure on fragile ethnic boundaries has increased, making religio-cultural differences harder to manage, and creating more instances of (intentional or unintentional) ethnic boundary crossing. x xiii Secondly, it has led to growing Uyghur perceptions of socio-economic inequalities between ethnic groups in Xinjiang (such that the unemployment rate among urban Uyghurs, for example, is blamed on the
increase in Han immigrants). Finally, the growth of the Han immigrant population has had a profound effect on the immigrants themselves. Han Chinese in Xinjiang now feel confidence in numbers, and no longer make efforts to adapt to local culture. This has meant that Uyghurs increasingly complain of Great Han chauvinism (attitudes of Han racial and cultural superiority) and racial discrimination.

The strengthening of the Uyghur national identity is reflected in the increasing reluctance of urban Uyghurs to interact with Han Chinese in the nineties. With the exception of practical relationships formed within the work environment, Uyghurs do not willingly mix with Han immigrants. Ethnic segregation is maintained between the two groups in the home environment and all social situations. If I asked Uyghurs whether they socialised with Han Chinese, the enquiry brought a negative click of the tongue or a decisive shake of the head. Yet it seems that things were not always this way. Several Uyghurs in their thirties or forties told me that, during their childhoods, they had sometimes entered the homes of Han Chinese playmates. At that time, religio-cultural differences relating to diet had been “managed” so that Uyghur children were allowed to play in Han homes, but did not eat or drink anything while they were there. At the present time, however, there are almost no instances of Uyghur children (or adults) socialising in this way. In addition to long-standing religio-cultural differences, some new factor must have intervened to bring about this total social and spatial segregation, and this new phase of ethnic separatism and conflict. That factor is a growing awareness of socio-economic inequalities between Uyghurs and Han Chinese.

Uyghur national identity in Xinjiang in the nineties defines itself in relation to Han Chinese immigrants in an “Us and Them” dichotomy. In emphasising the failure of Han Chinese to adhere to Islamic social laws and Uyghur national customs,
Uyghurs define the differences between themselves and the non-Muslim Han Chinese along religio-cultural lines. By also underlining socio-economic inequalities between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, they define themselves as an ethnic group in competition with the Han Chinese in a new urban social hierarchy. Whereas Uyghur attitudes towards religio-cultural differences between themselves and Han Chinese are largely characterised by disgust, Uyghur perceptions of socio-economic inequalities are instead characterised by anger, bitterness, passion, and a strong sense of injustice. These qualities are visible in the emotive description of Han Chinese as “hateful,” for example. Uyghurs clearly connect what they perceive as a steady influx of Han immigrants to the region with increased competition for land, education, jobs, commodities, and natural resources. Of these, Han privilege in the urban labour market and the exploitation of oil and coal for the benefit of Han Chinese living in China proper are cited most. That Han Chinese immigrants occupy posts that have, in the first place, been created by Han investment and development does nothing to lessen Uyghur resentment. While the Chinese government promises to modernise Xinjiang and improve living conditions, most Uyghurs believe that these improvements are made exclusively for the benefit of Han immigrants, while they themselves are forced into an increasingly marginalised position. Uyghur standards of living are at least the same and probably substantially better than they were before 1949. However, urban dissatisfaction stems from the fact that Uyghurs now have something to compare themselves with. It is socio-economic inequalities, therefore, which lie at the root of a rapidly strengthening Uyghur national identity, an identity that did not emerge previously on the strength of religio-cultural differences alone.

There is much evidence that perceived chauvinist attitudes among Han immigrants are further exacerbating relations between Uyghurs and Han Chinese.
Many Uyghurs claim that attitudes of racial and cultural superiority have become commonplace as the Han population in Xinjiang increases. Unlike first-generation Han settlers, who had to make efforts to establish themselves in an environment where Han Chinese language and culture were still marginalised, Han immigrants arriving in Xinjiang in the nineties join a larger community of Han Chinese among whom they feel confidence in numbers. As a result, they do not feel the same need to try to adapt to local culture. Uyghurs regularly complain, for instance, that new Han immigrants do not respect their native language, or that there are no longer any restrictions on the public sale of pork. This change in attitude among the Han Chinese population has also contributed to a growing Uyghur disinclination to socialise with Hans.

It is said that the Uyghurs originally “welcomed the Han Chinese with open arms.” Most Uyghurs in the nineties, however, say that they want the influx of Han immigrants to stop. Accordingly, some Uyghur separatists have identified the need to halt construction of the Qorla-Qäšqär southern Xinjiang railway. When finished, this railway will become the first rail link from north to south Xinjiang, and a convenient way of bringing Han immigrants to the south, where the Han Chinese population is as yet relatively small. In August 1997, separatists perpetrated a bomb attack that destroyed a bridge and two kilometres of track on this new railway. Also hit during that year was the Lanzhou-Ürümchi railway (the main means by which Han immigrants come to north Xinjiang). The fact that direct methods are now being employed to sabotage transport networks both within the region and between Xinjiang and China proper indicate that Uyghur separatists are becoming desperate to halt the flow of Han immigrants from the East.
Several external factors have also played a significant role in the development of the Uyghur national identity since the late eighties. Without these factors, Uyghur ethno-politics arguably might not have developed into its present form. The call for greater autonomy in the early eighties has been replaced since 1989 by overt demands for Xinjiang’s independence. It is no coincidence that this development follows certain significant domestic and international events and trends. The first calls for Xinjiang’s secession coincided with the 1989 pro-democracy movement in China, in which a student leader of Uyghur nationality, Örkäš Dölät (Wu’erkaixi), played an important part. For the first time since 1949, Uyghurs began to conceive of real opposition to Chinese Communist rule. After all, here were Han Chinese gathering in Beijing’s Tian’anmen Square and protesting against their own government. Furthermore, Uyghurs felt proud that an ethnic Uyghur should have become one of the major figures in the movement. From this time on, peaceful protest ceased and was replaced by increasingly violent demonstrations. The collapse of Eastern Europe in 1989 also undermined Chinese Communist authority in the eyes of many Uyghurs. Some began to joke that although the Chinese government had once said that only socialism could save China, it now believed that only China could save socialism (Rudelson 1997: 14).\textsuperscript{xxxvi}

But it was the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 and the subsequent formation of the independent CIS republics that sowed the definitive seeds of separatism in some Uyghur minds. Earlier theories that Xinjiang might be subject to the so-called “contamination effect” have been proved correct. Following the establishment in 1991 of the six independent Muslim republics (Azerbaijan, Qazaqstan, Özbäkistan, Qirghizstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan), the Uyghurs, the Tatars, and the Salars became the only Central Asian Muslims in Xinjiang without an
An independent country named after their ethnic group. xxvii The vision of the adjacent CIS republics has since greatly encouraged Uyghur national identity and the Uyghur independence movement, and has contributed to the coining in 1995 of a new name for the prospective independent state: “Uyghuristan.” xxviii The Chinese authorities have similarly identified the collapse of communism around the world as a major source of inspiration for separatists in Xinjiang. Wang Lequan, secretary of the CCP’s Xinjiang Autonomous Regional Committee, is reported to have acknowledged in 1996: “At the moment, there is an ideological trend which advocated Xinjiang’s independence and the setting up of an independent country. The effects of the tremendous changes in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the USSR had been felt to a certain extent over the past few years.” xxix

The independence movement has been further encouraged by the burgeoning of Islamic fundamentalist and political Islamist movements across the border and around the world. Reports suggest that weapons have been supplied to Xinjiang’s Muslim separatists by organisations in Pakistan, Afghanistan, the section of Kashmir under Pakistani control, Iran, and the CIS Muslim republics. xxx There has also been strong support for the movement among certain organisations in Turkey. xxxi However, the governments of these countries continue to publicly reassure China that they will not support separatism in Xinjiang. As a mark of their commitment to this promise, the Qazaqstan government returned four Uyghur mollas and their children to China in 1998 after they allegedly fled religious suppression in Qäšqär. xxxii Despite accepting aid from Muslims in other countries, Uyghurs do not appear to have adopted a supranational Islamic identity. In 1996, many Uyghurs in Qäšqär expressed reservations about the behaviour of Pakistani traders, and wished to distinguish between their own and Pakistani culture. Similarly, Uyghurs in Ürümchi...
differentiated between themselves and Qazaqs by suggesting that adherence to the Islamic faith was weak among the latter. There has been no indication that Uyghurs advocate fundamentalist Islam for Xinjiang. They appear rather to be using Islam as a focus in the mobilisation of local support. In the past, Uyghurs have often adapted religion to their particular social circumstances. For example, although the Turkish-Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan (hereafter TIRET) established in Qäšqär in the 1930s advocated the introduction of Shari’a law, it added in small print that it was also “prepared to adapt or reform aspects of Islamic custom in accordance with political and social conditions” (Forbes 1986: 113-14).

Reluctance of the elderly generation to return to chaos

Both the strengthening of the Uyghur national identity and the emergence of separatist ideologies in Xinjiang are the product of the aforementioned internal and external factors. Yet although most urban Uyghurs presently maintain strong Uyghur national identities, not everybody subscribes to separatist views that have emerged during the late eighties and early nineties. In the following sections, I present portraits of four generations of Uyghurs in an effort to reveal their respective backgrounds and the contrastive nature of their present outlooks and attitudes towards the independence movement. Each description is an ideal-type construct, which stands only for “…a certain stylization, in which the characteristic, distinctive, or ‘typical’ elements are stressed” (Freund 1968: 62). None can be encountered in all its purity in empirical reality. Certain “typical elements” may be absent from some individuals, while other individuals may display atypical elements. The purpose of the ideal-type construct here is to lend coherence and intelligibility to what is necessarily a fragmentary representation of reality.
The elderly generation of Uyghurs grew up during the chaotic and unstable years of the Warlord period, and suffered much at the hands of insensitive and exploitative Han Chinese and Tungan warlords and governors. Before the Chinese Communist take-over in 1949, almost all Han Chinese political leaders or military figures in Xinjiang pursued ruthless assimilatory policies that created social inequalities in the region’s traditional trading patterns, and disregarded or openly suppressed the religious and ethnic sensibilities of local Turkic Muslims. These short-sighted policies frequently led to local unrest. A long line of Han warlords and governors including Jin Shuren, Yang Zengxin, Sheng Shicai, and Wu Zhongxin, as well as military leaders including Zuo Zongtang, Zhu Ruichi, and Zhang Peiyuan, have been responsible for the repeated brutal suppression of Turkic uprisings from the end of the Yaqub Beg rebellion in 1884 right up to the 1940s.

Although today’s elderly Uyghurs are not quite old enough to remember Zuo Zongtang’s cruel defeat of the Yaqub Beg regime first-hand, they will almost certainly have heard the tale spun repeatedly by fathers and uncles. At the same time, they have grown up in an environment where political uncertainty and social gloom were the norm. To detail but a few examples: the famous Qumul Rebellion of 1931 was the result of a long period of economic injustice, disrespect for religion, and social paranoia suffered under the Han Chinese governor Jin Shuren. Caused in the first instance by the attempt of a Han official, Zhang Mu, to marry the daughter of a local Turkic Muslim, this large-scale Turkic uprising had reportedly been planned for some time before the Zhang Mu incident sparked it off (Forbes 1986: 49, Maillart 1983: 212). Swedish explorer and scientist Sven Hedin (1936: 3-4) writes that Jin’s rule was characterised by high taxes and customs, a monopoly on the furs and wool trade, the appropriation of land for Han Chinese, and the use of spies, who were
placed everywhere: “Discontent increased; the people clenched their teeth and bided their time; the atmosphere was tense and gloomy. Inflammable matter accumulated, and only a spark was needed to fire the powder magazine.”

Uyghurs were subjected to similar injustices under Tungan rule between 1934 and 1937. Far from joining ranks with their Muslim brothers, the Tungans ruled over the southern Tarim basin as a colony and remained loyal to the GMD government in Nanjing (Forbes 1986: 130-31).xxxiv In Tunganistan, taxation was heavy in order to support the military while the needs of local people were neglected. Farmers and merchants were exploited for the benefit of the garrisons, and forced conscription was common. Hedin (1940: 3) mentions the bad reputation that Tungans had earned in Xinjiang at this time. He writes that his team of scientists picked up supplies from a local beg at Shinnega who “understood that we were distinguished people from Europe and China, and not savage Tungans, who looted at will and paid for nothing they took.”xxxv By 1935, inflation was out of control, homesick Tungan troops were deserting, and local Uyghurs frequently fought with Tungan soldiers on the street.

Then, towards the end of 1937 and under the rule of the pro-Soviet Han warlord Sheng Shicai, Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples were plunged into a decade of ruthless political suppression (Forbes 1986: 151-161). This period began with a purge of Sheng’s opponents (Tungan and Turkic) via the fast-expanding Soviet secret police network (the Bao’andui or Security Preservation Corps). Following the purge, no Turkic Muslims and next to no Tungans held senior posts in government. According to Forbes, countless Muslim landowners, petty officials, mollas, and even those found reading religious books were imprisoned, sent to labour camps, or executed between 1937 and 1941. The secret police were so feared that conversation in Qumul was restricted to melon growing, the weather, and market prices. Those who
disappeared were said to have “gone to Chöchäk” (a northern Xinjiang town on the Soviet border). It is estimated that in ten years, Sheng imprisoned, tortured, and executed around 100,000 people.

The experiences of the present elderly generation of Uyghurs of government and society before 1949 were therefore extremely negative. It perhaps comes as no surprise that many older Uyghurs have no desire to return to the chaos and instability of that time, and consider the present political, social, and economic climate much improved in comparison with the past. In 1995-1996, ethno-political ideologies were rarely to be found on the lips of members of the older generation. On one occasion, the mother (in her early sixties) of an unemployed 16 year-old in Ürümqi’s Uyghur-dominated Erdaoqiao district looked disturbed to hear him talking of an independent state, shook her head, and gently reprimanded him. He sighed, grinned at me, and said: “Here we go again!” He seemed used to these differences of opinion and indicated that different generations of Uyghurs felt very differently about political matters: “Old people all think like that. They don’t like to talk about independence. They say ‘We have clothes to wear now. We have food to eat. We’re doing OK. Don’t rock the boat.’ You see, they’re afraid.” Similarly, a man in his seventies from Ürümqi summed up the viewpoint of his generation thus: “Young people can only see what is in front of them at the time. They have no ability to look ahead. Us older ones can see things in the long term, we’re less impetuous.” Uyghur youth is not only unwilling to look ahead but is also unable to look back. Elderly Uyghurs, by contrast, have a wealth of bitter memories and experiences on which to reflect. In their eyes, life under the Chinese Communists (particularly since the return of conciliatory minority policy in 1980) offers more economic prosperity, more freedom of religious and national custom, and, most importantly, social stability.
Fear among the elderly and middle-aged of a return of Maoist ideology

Uyghurs presently in their forties and fifties were born during the two decades following the CCP take-over. Like their mothers and fathers in the elderly generation, they, too, have grown up amid an atmosphere of political uncertainty as CCP policy (including policies on minorities) swung repeatedly between the extreme Left and the conciliatory Right between 1949 and 1979. They (like Han Chinese across the People’s Republic) were victims of the devastating famine caused by over-centralised economic policies pursued during the Great Leap Forward campaign of 1956-1958. The exodus in 1962 of 60,000 Uyghurs and Qazaqs across the border into the USSR fully demonstrated local resistance to these disastrous policies.

The middle-aged and elderly generations also suffered greatly from the religious and cultural suppression of minority nationalities during the Cultural Revolution years. There is much documentation of the extreme, assimilatory minority policies pursued by the Chinese government during this period. Perhaps most damaging of all was the decision to close almost all minority nationality schools (including Uyghur schools) in the region and instead force minority children to attend Han Chinese schools, where the first language learned was Chinese and pupils were educated in Han rather than minority customs. The long-term effects of this policy are still felt among the middle-aged generation today. Those among this first set of “involuntary” minkaohan (literally, “Minority nationality examined in the Han Chinese language,” or minority who attended a Han school) are often unable to read and write Uyghur script, are not fully fluent in spoken Uyghur and, to a certain extent, lack knowledge of Uyghur traditions.

One example of this phenomenon is Räwiä, a French language specialist in her mid-thirties from the regional capital of Ürümchi. Räwiä grew up in an environment
where her mother had to go to work for the Cultural Revolution each day and was rarely at home. As a result, the mother was unable either to teach her daughter the Uyghur language or to reinforce Uyghur traditions within her. Having no choice but to attend a Han school, Räwiä learned to speak, read, and write Chinese and studied Han rather than Uyghur cultural institutions. She also ended up partially internalising negative Han views of Uyghur culture and tradition. As a child among Han Chinese classmates, Räwiä admits feeling ashamed of being Uyghur: “When I was fifteen at middle school [1976], I used to think ‘Why wasn’t I born a Han?’” Yet during 1995-96, she frequently told me how proud she felt to be Uyghur and appeared to be experiencing a late awakening of Uyghur cultural identity. She had made the decision some years before to send her daughter to a Uyghur rather than a Han school. Räwiä herself had only begun to study Uyghur in her early twenties with a teacher at university. Now she wanted to ensure that her daughter learnt her mother tongue first.

Many Uyghurs aged between thirty and fifty show signs of psychological confusion, as though caught between loyalty to the Uyghur ethnic group and adherence to the Chinese Communist Party line. It is common for such individuals to say something in praise of Uyghur traditions on one day, but then to make derogatory statements about Uyghurs on the next (these often strongly resembling CCP discourse in the media). During my first conversation with Räwiä’s brother Tömür, an employee in a Han work unit in his forties, he became very excited at the suggestion that Uyghur traditions had been lost during the Maoist years, and insisted fiercely: “We never lost our traditions! The Cultural Revolution made no difference. We had to go to Han schools because there were no Uyghur schools, that’s all!” Yet on another occasion, Tömür supported the Chinese government’s decision not to allow foreigners to go to rural areas of Xinjiang, claiming: “The government is only thinking of your
safety. Uyghur people are quite savage, you know! There are some bad people about.” He went on to dub the Xotän rioters of July 1995 “savages,” and might just as well have been reading directly out of a Chinese newspaper. When I later asked Räwiä about this, she shook her head and said that her brother had been “talking just like the government talk.”

A Han Chinese education (and fluency in Chinese) has made middle-aged Uyghurs more susceptible both to propaganda in the Chinese language and to chauvinist attitudes among Xinjiang’s Han immigrants such that some members of the middle-aged generation appear to have taken on negative Han views of Uyghur culture. Yet the same cannot be said of young Uyghurs attending Han schools at present. Why are they less prone to assuming negative Uyghur identities? First, they have less to fear and less to lose than the middle-aged generation. Uyghurs in their thirties, forties, and fifties now have homes and families that they are anxious to protect, and have no desire to return to the atmosphere of ethnic and religious persecution that characterised the Cultural Revolution. Upon my arrival in Ürümchi, a young Uyghur man from a publishing house warned that many Uyghurs, especially those in their forties and above, would be “too scared” to give interviews. Another Uyghur woman I knew formerly translated articles on Xinjiang written by Western academics and journalists into Chinese for the government. She had given up the job after her cousin chided her: “What do you want to help them for? What happens when the next Cultural Revolution comes along?” Thus, the views and actions of the middle-aged are, to a large extent, curtailed by fear.

Revival of Uyghur identity among Uyghur Youth
The young generation, conversely, has grown up in an age of relative ethnic and religious tolerance. Since the introduction in 1980 of new conciliatory policies emphasising the need to respect minority nationality customs and guaranteeing freedom of religious belief, minority voices have once more begun to be heard in Xinjiang. The new, relaxed climate seems to have greatly encouraged a re-assertion of Uyghur ethnic identity in the form of a re-traditionalisation process. For example, since the early eighties and through the nineties, a large number of new mosques have been constructed across the region, the number of Uyghur-language journals and newspapers available has multiplied (Mackerras 1985: 77), wealthier Uyghurs have once more begun to build houses in traditional Islamic architectural style, and Uyghur university students (among others) have resurrected traditional Uyghur dance.

Some Uyghurs have taken advantage of this new period of tolerance to agitate for secession from the People’s Republic. The sudden relaxation of minority policy after so many years of suppression seemed to create an initial atmosphere of euphoria that encouraged Uyghurs almost instantly to begin campaigning for greater autonomy. In 1980 and 1981, a short burst of violent disturbances greeted the introduction of Deng’s new policies. Rioters in Qäšqär fought with Han Chinese police, and demanded improved employment prospects and increased autonomy for the region. Following the opening of Xinjiang’s borders in the mid-eighties, news from the outside world has flooded into the region via domestic and international media and Uyghurs have been increasingly exposed to knowledge of world events. Consequently, some have become aware that ethnic groups around the world are using Islam as a focus for political mobilisation with increasing success, and have themselves begun to conduct separatist activities in the name of Islam, not to mention
receiving money and weapons from mujaheddin abroad. A Hong Kong newspaper commented in 1995: “Some local personalities say that in Mao Zedong’s era, there was tight control over religious belief, so national secessionism was well under control; in recent years, however, because the authorities have adopted a relaxed policy towards religious belief, the instigators have often conducted secessionist activities in the name of religion.”

Uyghurs have also learned through the media that certain organisations in co-religionist countries support their political cause. For example, on 26 March 1996, the 4th Turkic States and Communities, Friendship, Brotherhood, and Co-operation Council in Ankara issued a communiqué recommending the speedy activation of a Turkic states’ human rights committee to inform the world of the “mass murder of Turks in eastern Turkestan.” Similarly, an Iranian newspaper published a long article in 1997 that condemned the execution of Muslims in Xinjiang and noted that “The crisis in Xinjiang is the outcome of that government’s policies. The suppression or further inflaming of the crisis depends on the government’s method of approach to the crisis.” Thus, overt support from Islamic countries outside the region has further encouraged separatist activities.

The young generation has grown up in an age of relative ethnic and religious freedom, has experienced a process of rapid re-traditionalisation across the region since 1980, and every day lives out the competitive “Us and Them” ethnic dichotomy that has developed between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in urban areas over the past two decades. The youth has also seen the 1989 pro-democracy movement in China, the collapse of Eastern Europe and the USSR, the formation of the independent CIS republics, and the burgeoning of Islamic fundamentalist movements world-wide. Given this climate, it is perhaps not surprising that the young are more likely than the
older generations to adopt separatist ideologies. In 1995-1996, three groups of young urban Uyghurs aspired to independence from China: male dissident intellectuals, male petty entrepreneurs, and the unemployed.\textsuperscript{xliii}

In Ürümchi, young male intellectuals (university students and graduates from oases across the region) almost without exception oppose what they describe as Han Chinese “occupation” of Xinjiang and cherish hopes of a future Uyghur independent state.\textsuperscript{xlix} Many maintain that the education system in Xinjiang not only is designed to favour Han Chinese students but also aims to “keep Uyghurs stupid.” They suggest that the Chinese government fears that increased knowledge among Uyghurs could bring with it the means of Uyghur opposition to Chinese rule. Most young male intellectuals are extremely sensitive to manifestations of Great Han chauvinism among Han immigrants (as well as internalised negative ethnic identities or inferiority complexes among Uyghurs). The suggestion that any element of Han Chinese culture is superior to its Uyghur counterpart often provokes exasperation and anger. Most of all, Uyghur intellectuals are concerned about lack of Han respect for their native language and the effective marginalisation of the Uyghur language in Xinjiang. They resent the fact that Chinese has been institutionalised as the norm in a society where everyday activities should, in their opinion, be conducted in Uyghur.

The typical disposition of a Uyghur dissident intellectual in the mid- to late nineties can be understood through an analysis of the character of Šöhrat, a young archaeologist in his mid-twenties. Šöhrat, like many young Uyghur academics, maintains that Han Chinese have created a myth of origin regarding their history in Xinjiang, and that they will go to any lengths to “prove” their presence in the region for hundreds of years. For instance, he often describes, laughing, how Han archaeologists “bury things in Xinjiang and then dig them up again” in an attempt to
legitimate this myth of origin. Although Han Chinese can present their version of historical events in Xinjiang in an official form that gives the impression of being sanctioned, most educated Uyghur men dismiss works by Han historians as “re-writings” that carefully recreate the role of the Han Chinese in the region’s local history in order to consolidate their political legitimacy. Šöhrat further claims that the Han Chinese are anxious to suppress academic materials that do not support their own version of events. He once related how he had heard a Han historian state that the work of Barthold, the acclaimed Central Asia scholar, was “unreliable and of a low standard.” This historian reasoned that nobody could truly research Xinjiang or Central Asia if they were unable to read materials in Chinese (i.e., if they did not read the version approved by the CCP). Barthold’s work, on the other hand, is based mostly on Turkic language sources and presents a picture of Chinese Central Asian history that is closer to the Uyghur than the Han Chinese version.

In his own version of ethno-history, Šöhrat refers to two periods when Uyghurs enjoyed a flourishing “high” Turkic culture: the steppe Uyghur Empire (745-840), and the Buddhist Uyghur kingdom of Turpan (850-1250).\(^1\) Although the steppe Uyghur Empire became a symbol for Uyghurs beginning to define a modern Uyghur identity in the mid-thirties (Rudelson 1997: 31), Uyghurs in the nineties more often draw inspiration from the Buddhist Uyghur kingdom of Turpan. There are clear strategic reasons for this choice. Ethno-political ideologies in the present rely strongly on the idea that Xinjiang is the land of the Uyghurs and their rightful territory. Reference to the steppe Uyghur Empire (situated in what is now the Mongolian Republic) only draws attention to the fact that the ancient Uyghurs did not live within the territory of present-day Xinjiang.
Šöhrat’s verdict on the Han Chinese is black and white. In his opinion, all Hans are the same: ill-mannered, arrogant, oppressive, and exploitative. He attributes negative motives to every Han act, regardless of circumstance. For instance, on one occasion, he claimed that Han Chinese learned the Uyghur language only in order to better control Uyghurs. He constantly makes derogatory jokes about Chinese communism and attacks Han Chinese customs. His antipathy towards the Han Chinese as a whole expresses itself in his relations with Han Chinese colleagues. He often makes sarcastic comments to Hans in his work unit, framing these in humorous tones so that his colleagues remain nonplussed by his remarks. He also delights in making things awkward for them in their daily duties by, for example, insisting on his right to special treatment as a Uyghur. In this way, Šöhrat underlines his contrastive ethnic identity vis-à-vis the Han Chinese (via an emphasis on the importance of minority languages) while at the same time deliberately baiting his Han colleagues.

He also loses no opportunity to report incidents of Han religio-cultural or socio-economic discrimination against Uyghurs. He once described how the 1993 Forum for Talent Exchange (Rencai jiaoliuhui) held in Ürümchi had been cancelled halfway through after Han company representatives were accused of intending to employ only Han Chinese or Uyghurs whose first language was Chinese (minkaohan). The authorities had allegedly shut the Forum down after students from Xinjiang University threatened to march in protest. Šöhrat also claimed that a limited number of entry passes for the same Forum in 1995 were sent out to selected companies and work units only (i.e., those that employed mainly Han Chinese). He nonetheless managed to obtain a pass and later reported that only one company stall had its details advertised in Uyghur script as well as Chinese. He further tested company attitudes towards Uyghurs by approaching a computing firm and offering his services, but
claimed that he was rebuffed by representatives, who replied: “We hadn’t considered Uyghurs.”

The latest strategy of Xinjiang’s urban intellectuals is to achieve goals for Uyghurs by encouraging the young to penetrate the modern education system and thereby “play the Hans at their own game.” Many feel that only through an increase in scientific knowledge, computing know-how, and foreign language ability will the young generation become strong enough to compete with and oppose the Han immigrant population. To this end, some Ürümchi academics organised and taught evening classes in English and computing in 1995-96. These are both areas neglected at Uyghur schools, where the second language taught is Chinese and computing is not taught at all. Many intellectuals thus rest their hopes for the more effective mobilisation of ethno-political ideologies on the young generation.

Other Uyghurs likely to subscribe to separatist ideologies in the mid- to late nineties belong to the category of urban males on low incomes, that is, petty entrepreneurs and the unemployed. According to Hong Kong’s *Tung fang jih pao* newspaper, most separatists arrested so far for engaging in terrorist activities have been poorly educated unemployed young men. Popular opinion, Chinese government reports, and reports drawn up by human rights organisations also support this theory. Upon my arrival in Ürümchi, a Uyghur publisher told me that jobless, unmarried Uyghur men were most likely to speak out about their aspirations to independence. He explained: “The ones who are unemployed will tell you anything. They have no fear, they’re really gutsy.” Support for the independence movement among young men on low incomes is strongly linked to their desire to control Xinjiang’s natural resources, particularly deposits of oil and coal. At an Ürümchi market, a 20 year-old stallholder from southern Aqsu told me excitedly: “Xinjiang is teeming with oil. But every day it
leaves Qaramay in freight carriages for the east.” On another day, he claimed: “Do you know that if just one day’s worth of cargo from Xinjiang to China proper were stopped, it would be sufficient to supply Uyghurs in Xinjiang for three years?”

Several other stallholders gathered round to listen and nod in agreement. The information had allegedly been learned from economics students at Xinjiang University. This same young man frequently spoke about his dreams of a future, independent “Eastern Turkestan.” He insisted that Uyghurs had to win independence within the next few years for, in twenty years’ time, there would be no natural resources left for Uyghurs. For Ghäyrät, a young kebab-seller in Ürümchi, the future of the Han Chinese in Xinjiang similarly depends on their economic policies: “They can stay if they help us to develop; but the ones who just squeeze money out of Xinjiang and steal our raw materials can leave!”

During 1995-1996, all three of these groups expressed a strong belief that Xinjiang would gain her independence in 1997. At first, I was intrigued and wondered if there might be an organised conspiracy behind these hopes. Gradually, I realised that what I came to call the “1997 theories” were not founded on any definite plan of action. On the contrary, the outcomes Uyghurs dreamed of relied on events outside the region, all of which were out of their control. One migrant worker in Ürümchi was a passionate advocate of the “Hong Kong theory.” We held the following conversation:

Author: Do you really believe that Xinjiang will be independent one day?
Uyghur: Yes, I believe it! There isn’t a single Uyghur in the whole of Xinjiang that doesn’t believe it.
Author: When do you think it will happen, then?
Uyghur: In 1997. There is no way that England is really going to give Hong Kong back.
Author: I wouldn’t be so sure about that.
Uyghur: Don’t you think there will be a war, then?
In this way, many young Uyghur men seemed truly convinced (or perhaps wanted to believe) that England actually had no intention of returning Hong Kong to China, and that China and England would become embroiled in conflict. Such a development would weaken China’s domestic defences so that Uyghurs would have a chance to break away. Ghäyrät, the kebab-seller, advanced a different theory (one also propounded by Chinese and Western political analysts) that China might one day split into five independent regions. He thought that both Tibet and Xinjiang would become independent at that time. I asked him what would happen to Xinjiang’s Han immigrants in such an eventuality:

Author: So what happens to the Hans when Xinjiang secedes?
Ghäyrät: I know what you’re saying. The thing is, we don’t want to kill anyone at the end of the day. We just want to be our own leaders. This is our land. We want them to give Xinjiang back to us.
Author: And what would happen to all the Hans who now live in Xinjiang? Are you going to make them all leave?
Ghäyrät: No. They can stay so long as they submit to our laws, new laws made by our leadership.

His words reflect the popular feeling that the majority of Uyghurs are basically passive and would prefer to win Xinjiang through diplomatic not warlike means.

Finally, there was the “Taiwan theory.” If China were drawn into argument with the United States over the future of Taiwan, her attention might be diverted long enough for Uyghurs to instigate revolt.

**Increasingly politicised attitudes among the youth**

The arrest in 1996 of a large number of teenagers and Uyghurs in their early twenties suggested that the youth was becoming increasingly politicised and was the most likely among the four generations of Uyghurs to adopt separatist ideologies. There have been other signs that the Chinese authorities expect this teenage generation to be problematic. Repeated statements in the press in 1996 such as: “Religious activities
are absolutely not allowed to infiltrate into ordinary schools, nor will anyone be
allowed to instil national splittism ideology and religious creeds into students”
suggested that such ideologies had already started to make inroads.\textsuperscript{lii} Meanwhile,
Keyum Bawadun, the deputy secretary of the regional Party committee, made a
speech during an inspection tour of Aqsu prefecture in May 1997 in which he
underlined the importance of educating youths and juveniles about national
secessionists.\textsuperscript{liv}

I became acquainted with a number of teenage “radicals” in 1995 and 1996. A
16 year-old unemployed boy living in a traditional yard (\textit{hoyla}) in Ürümchi despaired
of the political apathy of the older generations, and drew his own inspiration from the
recent independence movements in former Soviet Central Asia. As he put it: “All the
other nationalities have their own country now, so why shouldn’t we?” Azatgül, a 15
year-old schoolgirl in Aqsu New Town, was equally preoccupied with dreams of
independence, and listened to radio broadcasts in Uyghur coming out of Qazaqstan
each day. These broadcasts (emanating from émigré Uyghur sources and probably
exaggerated in an attempt to stir up rebellion) informed her that Xinjiang was
receiving money and guns from other Muslim countries to help in a 1997 bid for
independence. She was perfectly convinced of their truth. She confided that she loved
politics and frequently delved into her father’s bookshelf: “I’m really interested in
politics. I read a lot of old books about Uyghur history.” She also spoke sadly of the
arrest in 1996 of one of her classmates. The 15 year-old schoolboy had stabbed three
Han Chinese shop assistants after they allegedly subjected him to racial abuse. He had
subsequently been taken away by Han police and denied visits from his friends and
family. Azatgül explained that she and her parents had attempted to take him some
Uyghur home cooking, but the Chinese authorities had refused to disclose his place of
detention. The boy’s father had also been imprisoned for “bringing his son up to hate Hans” and attempting to hide him from the police. Sänä, another 15 year-old schoolgirl in Ürümchi, often expressed a dislike of the Han Chinese and of Han culture. For instance, she would claim that Hans “had no feelings” or that they were a rude and inhospitable people. She also disclosed how she and her classmates used to discuss the political future of their people:

Sänä: If we had weapons, we could make all the Hans leave! A year or so ago, I used to talk with my classmates about things like this all the time.
Author: With boys or girls?
Sänä: Both. Although most girls at school just talk about their clothes or hairstyles...they just think about having their own home.

Although fewer Uyghur females advocate separatism than males, these are signs that young girls are becoming more politicised than before. It is probably no coincidence that these teenagers all come from Ürümchi or Aqsu, areas where Han immigrants have surpassed the number of local Uyghurs (and therefore represent a substantial cultural and socio-economic threat), or verge on doing so.

So why is Uyghur youth growing up with a different outlook to that of preceding generations? The answer must lie within the gradual process of identity formation. The identities we assume as adults will be a combination of what Eriksen (1993: 147) calls “identity fragments,” that is, identifications made during childhood (generally unconscious), and those pieces of identity which we consciously gather from the social world, based on our positive and negative experiences there. As Uyghur children are growing up, they listen each day to their parents’ descriptions of “the way things are.” At the same time, they are constantly absorbing knowledge from observations of interactions between family members, and interactions between the family and the outside world. In the nineties, and in the wake of the strengthening of
the intricate system of ethnic boundaries that separate Uyghurs and Han immigrants, these children are frequently exposed to teachings and experiences that can only alienate them from the Han Chinese. They learn that Hans pursue very different cultural practices to those followed by Uyghurs, and that their relatives, neighbours, and friends strongly disapprove of those (non-Islamic) practices. They observe other Uyghurs in their environment living their lives according to a taken-for-granted set of norms incomprehensible to the average Han Chinese. They frequently overhear parents and family friends complaining of Han exploitation of Xinjiang’s natural resources and of socio-economic inequalities between Uyghurs and Hans. Young urban Uyghurs then come to experience those inequalities first-hand as they realise that they must attend Han Chinese schools if they are to compete with Han immigrants for university places and employment in the Han-dominated urban society. Finally, Uyghur youth is being raised in an environment where social and spatial segregation is now maintained between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in almost all situations. It is perhaps no wonder that ever more Uyghur youths now enter adulthood with an “ingrained” antipathy to Han immigrants and Han Chinese hegemony.

While urban males in their twenties and thirties have stronger Uyghur national identities than their middle-aged parents and elderly grandparents, they claim that their children in turn promise to be the most defiant generation yet. Šöhrat, the young archaeologist in his twenties, cited this example: “Recently, there was this Uyghur kid on telly. They [Han Chinese presenters] tried to get him to say how much he liked this Chinese shushu [uncle]. But the kid just turned around and hurled abuse at him! Live on TV!” Šöhrat believes that Uyghurs are in a transition period. He and his friends subscribe to the theory that, once the cautious older generations pass away and the youth grows up to raise its own children, Uyghurs will finally be united in
nationalist spirit. This optimistic view, however, may be shared only by a small number of male urban intellectuals.

**Conclusion: as Uyghurs come out of transition...**

Supposing that the transition period theory comes to fruition, there remain many other problems that Uyghurs must solve if they are to pose a genuine challenge to the Chinese authorities. Although the young generation is twice as likely as its forefathers to adopt secessionist ideologies, it faces problems of disunity within its own ranks. Over the next ten to fifteen years, it is likely that an increasing number of young, urban Uyghurs will be educated in Han Chinese schools. The decision to give a Uyghur child a Han Chinese education, and turn him or her into a *minkaohan*, brings with it as many disadvantages as advantages. While laying the foundation for a university education and better career and life prospects, a Han education also results in perceived cultural deficiencies. Adult *minkaohan* are often unable to read and write Uyghur script, are not completely fluent in spoken Uyghur, and feel themselves devoid of certain important elements of Uyghur cultural identity. These perceived deficiencies often lead to their ostracisation by *minkaomins* (literally “minorities examined in their own minority language,” i.e., Uyghurs who attended Uyghur schools).

Would-be secessionists also face the challenge of winning the support of Xinjiang’s women. Although many women in Xinjiang regret Han Chinese dilution of Uyghur culture in the past and maintain strong Uyghur national identities in the present, most nonetheless take a more practical (or perhaps cynical) attitude towards notions of independence. Räwiä, the French language specialist in Ürümchi, feels that secession is now an impossibility and that all Uyghurs can do is to concentrate on
securing an egalitarian society: “OK, the Hans are here now, they can stay. But everyone must be equal. I can’t hope for more. They didn’t want to give up Taiwan, so we’re never going to get this huge piece of land off them.” Although Räwiä has a strong identity as a member of an ethnic group in competition with the Hans and is adamant that equal opportunities must be secured for Uyghurs, she (like many women in urban areas) nonetheless considers the separatist cause hopeless and impractical. Uyghur men accordingly dub their women “pacifists” who think only of marriage, children, and the home, and exclude them from the largely male domain of political discussion. In so doing, they minimise the possibility of enlisting female support for the separatist cause.

Then there is the reality of the differing circumstances of urban and rural Uyghurs. Firstly, rural Uyghurs have experienced a substantial improvement in living standards since the advent of the Open Door policy and the new freedom to till private plots. Rudelson (1997:68) found in 1989-1990 that peasants in Turpan were “relatively pleased by the religious, economic, and cultural changes introduced by the government.” Similarly, many peasants in Aqsu in 1996 expressed satisfaction with post-1980 economic policies, and indicated that life had been better since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Tursun, a farmer from Xotän, explained that when the land was communally farmed, his wife was earning only 5 mao a day. Now, he said, they were much better off: “The land is still owned by the government, of course. But a person can rent out as little or as much as they like. So you earn as much as the work you put in, and lazy people earn nothing!”

Secondly, unlike urban Uyghurs, rural Uyghurs have so far been comparatively insulated from contact with Han Chinese immigrants, who have not penetrated the countryside in large numbers. They have not yet experienced Han
chauvinist attitudes or competition from Han Chinese for education and employment. Nor do they feel their native language to have been marginalised in their rural environment, where government decrees are still issued in Uyghur. These factors help to explain why the new independence movement in Xinjiang has been predominantly urban. In 1995-1996, Han Chinese simply did not carry the same stigma in the countryside that they did in the towns. Uyghur peasants liked to show off their knowledge of Chinese (compared with urban Uyghurs who only speak Chinese when conversing with Han immigrants). They were also happy to wear clothes and use other commodities associated with Han Chinese. At two evening gatherings in rural Aqsu, I observed the reactions of several male peasants to their urban cousin’s slightly drunken speeches about independence. On both occasions, they shook their heads warily and said that they were “unable to hold such views.” It remains unclear, however, whether these Aqsu peasants are unable (i.e., too afraid) or unwilling to support the independence movement.

The independence movement has thus far suffered greatly from a lack of unified political organisation. This is due partly to the reality that Uyghurs are unable to form pro-independence groups overtly and can only conduct separatist activities (which are considered illegal by the Chinese government) underground. Rebellions in the nineties have been sporadic and are rarely co-ordinated across the region. Recent exceptions include the simultaneous raising of the Eastern Turkestan flag in three towns in 1996 (Smith 1999: Appendix I), and the synchronised, armed insurrections that took place in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia shortly before China’s National Day in 1997. iv

There appears to be less support for Uyghur ethno-politics in the eastern oases
(Turpan, Qumul), where Uyghurs have traditionally enjoyed good trading relations with China proper. According to Rudelson’s (1997: 9, 46) findings in 1989-1990, many Turpanliqs had profited greatly from the grape industry since the early eighties and maintained healthy identities as Chinese citizens. As I was unable to conduct research in Turpan, it is uncertain whether this is still the case in the mid- to late nineties, although there have been no major uprisings in the eastern oases to date.

There is also a clash of political vision between Uyghurs in the north and south of the region. Like the rebels of the 1930s and 40s, many southerners still advocate the establishment of an “Eastern Turkestan” and continue to seek political support from Turkey, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. Yet in the north, a different pattern has emerged. Since the establishment of the independent republic of Qazaqstan, the Qazaqs of the northern prefectures have demanded variously: a) the right to leave Xinjiang and “return” to their motherland of Qazaqstan; b) that Xinjiang also becomes an independent CIS republic; and c) that Ili prefecture be merged with Qazaqstan. Northern Uyghurs, on the other hand, have begun to call for the establishment of “Uyghuristan,” a development that suggests that Uyghur identity is stronger than ever before. This choice of name does not bode well for the potential unification of Uyghurs, Qazaqs, and other minority nationalities in the north against Chinese rule. In the event that Xinjiang did achieve independence in the future, Uyghur chauvinism is likely to cause temporary alliances with other ethnic groups (in particular, the Qazaqs) to break down once more. Aliyä, a female postgraduate studying dentistry in Ürümchi, is one of many intellectuals to have rejected the old name “Eastern Turkestan” in favour of the new term based on the Uyghur ethnonym. She explained: “I don’t really like the term ‘Eastern Turkestan.’ That implies that the land still doesn’t belong to us. We are not Turks any more. We are now quite different
from them.” Her words suggest that the Turkic identity has considerably weakened in the north.

Despite these numerous obstacles to Uyghur unity, there are signs that the independence movement has gained in popularity in the second half of the nineties. While Rudelson concluded that in 1989-1990 only Uyghur intellectuals subscribed to Uyghur nationalism, I found in 1995-1996 that three groups of urban Uyghurs had strong ethno-political aspirations: intellectuals, petty entrepreneurs, and the unemployed. Three years on, in 1999, it appears that Uyghur separatism not only has begun to spread from urban to rural areas, but has also spread to other social groups. According to several reports released by Amnesty International in January 1999, Uyghurs recently detained on suspicion of taking part in separatist activities or providing help to separatists include secondary school teachers, peasants, merchants, a surgeon, a factory worker, Xinjiang’s “millionaire businesswoman” Rābiyā Qadir, and even a local Uygur cadre. Resistance also appears to be better organised than previously. In September 1997, trans-regional rebellions occurred simultaneously in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia shortly before National Day. For the first time, it appeared that separatists from Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia had colluded to cause trouble for the Chinese authorities. On this occasion, rebels in Xinjiang called for the establishment of “Xinjiangstan.” It is possible that this new choice of name was intended to bring about a consensus between nationalities such that they were not only united in their ethno-political cause but also unified in their vision of the future.

However, Uyghurs lack a figurehead capable of uniting Uyghurs across the region, and have lacked such a leader throughout history. At present, there are two types of figurehead available among Uyghur émigrés. The first is the armed resistance leader based in Qazaqstan, who periodically slips into Xinjiang to incite rebellion and
encourage Uyghurs to take up arms in a guerrilla war against Han troops (for example, Abdulghappar Shahiyari). The second is the dissident intellectual, who actively campaigns for the Xinjiang independence movement from outside the region (for example, Erkin Alptekin, son of the late Uyghur nationalist Yusuf Isa Alptekin). To date, no one figure has managed to gain the unanimous support and recognition of the Uyghur population in the way that certain novelists and singer-songwriters have. The yearning for a charismatic focus comparable with the Tibetans’ Dalai Lama is implicit in Uyghur admiration for such figures as Yaqub Beg, Sädäm Hussein, and even Adolf Hitler. There is lately a popular saying among young Tibetans which goes: “We have the leader, but we lack the people. The Uyghurs have the people, and yet they lack the leader.” This paper suggests that over the next ten to fifteen years, Uyghur national identity is likely to strengthen further, especially among Uyghur youth.

References


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1 This term was coined by Bøckman (1992: 192).
2 Tsering Shakya identifies Tibetan awareness that they have not benefited from economic reforms and will always be marginalised vis-à-vis Han immigrants (he calls this the “Tibetan national disadvantage”) as the impetus for post-1987 demonstrations by young Tibetans. “China-Tibet: Further Dialogue?” East Asia Research Seminar. Leeds University. 17/2/99; Talk on his book The Dragon in the Lands of Snow at Waterstones, Leeds. 3/2/99.
3 By the term “China proper,” I refer to the Han-dominated areas of the People’s Republic, and exclude the autonomous regions of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia.
4 All ethnic disturbances known to have occurred in Xinjiang between 1962 and September 13 1993 are documented by Dillon (1995) in Part Three: “Turkic Opposition and Communist Response.” I have analysed patterns of Uyghur dissent between 1949 and 1997 in Chapter 3 (“An analysis of Uyghur protest and dissent since Chinese Communism”) of my Ph.D thesis (Smith 1999).
8 Zhongguo xinwen she news agency, Beijing. 8 March 1997 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 11 March 1997, FE/2864 G/3; Sing tao jih pao, Hong Kong, 10 March 1997 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 11 March 1997, FE/2864 G/4; Broadcasting Corporation of China News Network, Taipei, 8 March 1997 in SWB (Asia Pacific).

Informal conversation with Aliyä, a female postgraduate in Ürümchi; with Aliyä’s father in Kuchar; with Adalät, a minkoohan ambulance worker in Ürümchi; with a male peasant in his early forties from Aqsu; with a young Han male in Aqsu New Town; with a Uyghur doctor and teacher on a bus between Qäšqär and Xotän; and with two British teachers working at Jiaoyu xueyuan in Ürümchi. cf. Xinjiang ribao, Ürümchi, 19 May 1996 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 7 June 1996, FE/2632 G/12, which hints at disturbances in Kuchar around this time; and Sing tao jih pao, Hong Kong, 5 March 1997 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 6 March 1997, FE/2860 G/3, which refers to Document 7.

Informal conversation with Dilsät, a young, male translator in Qäšqär; with a Uyghur doctor on a bus between Qäšqär and Xotän; with a male peasant in his early forties from Aqsu; cf. Xinjiang Television, Ürümchi, 16 July 1996 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 18 July 1996, FE/2667 G/7; Zhongguo xinwen she news agency, Beijing, 31 May 1996 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 3 June 1996, FE/2628 G/6; and Ming pao, Hong Kong, 29 May 1996 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 31 May 1996, FE/2626 G/4; Zhongguo Xinwen She news agency, Beijing, 20 January 1997 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 22 January 1997, FE/2823 G/5.


Xinjiang ribao, Ürümchi, 28 July 1997 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 13 August 1997, FE/2996 G/7.


For a discussion of the role of psychological boundary maintenance in ethnic relations, see Barth (1969).

Xinjiang ribao reported in 1996 that there had been problems between new Han immigrants and local people because the former had not received a “systematic education in the nationalities policy and the etiquette of nationalities.” Xinjiang ribao, Ürümchi, 22 May 1996 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 13 June 1996, FE/2637 G/10.

See Uyghur singer-songwriter Ömärjan Alim’s song Mehman Başlidim (“I Brought Home A Guest”), from the cassette Pärwayim Päläk ("Destiny Is My Concern"), which was banned following its release.
This was also a well-known joke among Han Chinese at the time.

The Salars are said to have originated from a Turkmen tribe (Schwarz 1984: 39-40), and therefore might be said to have their own country in Turkmenistan. The Tatars and the Salars in Xinjiang numbered only 4,821 and 3,660 persons respectively in 1990, compared with a Uyghur population of 7,194,675. Thomas Hoppe. (1992) “Die chinesische Position in Ost-Turkestan/Xinjiang.” China aktuell. p. 360. Cited in Dillon (1995: 48).

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Tung hsiang, Hong Kong, 15 June 1995 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 22 June 1995, FE/2336 G/5.


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For details of the steppe Uyghur Empire, see Mackerras (1968) and Barfield (1989: 150-157). Mackerras analyses the Uyghurs’ relationship with Tang China through side-by-side translations of the Tang dynastic histories *Jiu Tangshu* and *Xin Tangshu*; Barfield provides a condensed summary of the rise and fall of the Uyghur Empire. A description of the Buddhist Uyghur Gaochang kingdom can be found in Geng (1984: 6-8).


Towards the end of January 1996, 400 young people (mainly students from Xinjiang University) were arrested and taken away for questioning in Ürümchi. They were allegedly suspected of forming separatist organisations and/or carrying out organised “splittist” activities (Smith 1999: Appendix I).

*Xinjiang Television, Ürümchi, 14 May 1996 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 18 May 1996, FE/2615 G/9.*

*Xinjiang ribao, Ürümchi, 22 May 1997 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 10 June 1997, FE/2941 G/4.*


For a recent interview with Alptekin, see *Il Giornale*, Milan, 27 November 1997 in SWB (Asia Pacific), 8 October 1997, FE/3090 G/7.

For example, the late novelist Abdurehim Ötkür and the singer-songwriters Ömärjan Alim and Abdurehim Heyit. All are famous for writing Uyghur nationalist materials.

In 1989-1990, Rudelson (1997: 72) found that Uyghurs were fascinated by Hitler. He identifies several reasons for this, including the fact that Hitler symbolised power and discipline.