Disfranchised under the name of Zhonghua Minzu

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Introduction: The origin and development of Zhonghua Minzu (Chinese Nation)

China is a country with fifty-six ethnicities with Han being the vast majority. In China, many minorities own their own distinctive history and culture.¹ Yet, these 56 ethnicities are usually simplified under the title of Zhonghua Minzu (Chinese national) by the government and Han people under political, social, and cultural realm. Under such identity, all Chinese nationals share the same ethnic origin of being the decedents of Yan, and Huang Emperor, two mythical figures from the ancient Chinese folklore.² Zhonghua Minzu was created by a Chinese philosopher and revolutionary for articulating the anti-Manchurian identity during the late Qing Dynasty.³ It then remained until the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as a political rhetoric to represent a unified Chinese identity. Minorities in China today assimilated their culture into Han Chinese on different degrees, including their languages, daily attires, social values, and religions. Chinese nation and Han ethnicity are interchangeable under many circumstances.

However, even decades after CCP’s governing, Uyghurs, one of the Turkic Sunni Muslim minorities, remains distinct from the mainstream Chinese identity. The province they concentrated in, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), located in the western periphery of the country as showed in the Map 1. As its Chinese name “Xinjiang”—the “new territory”—implies, Xinjiang only became part of the Chinese administration in Qing Dynasty in

¹ Over 90% of the Chinese population is Han. Kai-wing Chou, p.34.
² ibid. p.34-35.
³ ibid.
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the late eighteenth century (Kurlantzick, Joshua. 2004).^4^  

Map 1. Xinjiang’s geographic position in China*  

The self-identification of Uyghurs remains fluid and fragmented. This ethnic group claimed their Buddhist ancestry, and only associated with Islamic religion in the early 20th century (Ben-Adam, 1997). The Uyghur identity formed as the urban towns with small pockets of Turkic groups, Mongols, and Han Chinese habitants emerged along the ancient Silk Road in Central Asia. Uyghur diasporas in former Soviet Union states associate themselves as Afghans and Russians rather than the Turks (Van Wie Davis & Azizan, p. 49). Until today the Uyghur identity was divided into a pan-Turkic one versus a pan-Islamic one, with the pan-Turkistani group presents themselves as human rights victims from the Chinese authorities and seek Western

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^4^ Uyghur is also written as Uighur. This paper is using the former spelling according to the English documents by the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China.  
* All maps besides Map 3 were created by ArcGIS.
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support, and the pan-Islamic group demonstrates an anti-Western and anti-American image closer to radical Islamic groups. As shown from the map below, Xinjiang shares its border with former Soviet countries, including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan; it also positioned next to states with known terrorist activities, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. Moreover, it is about the same distance from Turpan, an ancient Uyghur city, eastward of Beijing and westward of Turkey.

Map 2. Xinjiang and its position towards Central Asia

Culturally, the gulf between Uyghur’s self-defined identity and Zhonghua Minzu remains wide. Compared to central Asian ethnicities, such as Kazaks, Tatars, and Kyrgyzs, Uyghurs even

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5 Van Wie Davis & Azizan, p. 56-57.
6 Turpan is 3663km from Turkey and 4346km from Beijing. Timeanddate.com
share a looser tie with the majority Han Chinese (Bhattacharji, Preeti. 2012). Language-wise, the native Uyghur language belongs to the Turkic family that is similar to Uzbek and is written in Arab script.\(^7\) Uyghurs subscribe to Islamic laws and practices. On the contrary, most of Han people speak and write in Mandarin; they are either non-religious or practice religions other than Islam. Of the region’s diverse ethnic groups, the Muslim population among other ethnic groups is also sizeable. Other than Uyghur, ten other ethnic minorities in the region, including Kazak, Uzbek, Tajik, and Hui,\(^8\) considered themselves Muslims (Reed & Raschke, 2010, p.18-20). The small portion of religious Han Chinese are Buddhists, Christians, Catholics, and Taoists.

Religious extremists remained the biggest worry for the CCP to maintain its grasp in this periphery region, as it can be used as a tool for political gatherings and demonstrations.\(^9\) As the Han political agenda changed, the concept of Zhonghua Minzu shifted from fighting against the domination of a non-Han government in the late Qing Dynasty in Eastern China, to diminishing ethnic and religious activities for a tighter-controlled administration in China’s minority concentrated regions. To the CCP, the deeper minorities assimilate into Han culture, the less likely they will formulate their own identity to compete with the government, thus the more stable of the local polity.

\(^7\) Although a large percentage of Uyghurs can speak and write Mandarin, it is because the Chinese government made learning Mandarin a requirement for all schools in the region. The Uyghur language is still the first-language for most of ethnic Uyghurs.

\(^8\) Hui are Han Chinese who practices Islam.

\(^9\) Han, Enze. 2013. Chapter 3, p.44-45.
Literature Review: Territorial Approach and Self-Determination

There are two major schools of thought on how ethnicity was formed, with a divergence on how fluid one’s perception of their own identity is. Primordialism argues that “ethnicity is so deeply rooted in historical experience that it should properly be treated as a given in human relations” (Cordell & Wolff, p.15). On the other hand, constructivists believe that ethnicity is not set in historical context; rather, it is “primarily a practical recourse that individuals and groups deploy opportunistically to promote their more fundamental security and economic interests” (p.15). In other words, members of the ethnic group frame their ethnicity accordingly to benefit themselves at time, and therefore, the current situation also needs to be considered when assessing one ethnicity.

In addition to historical background and current situation, geopolitics is another critical element when evaluating ethnicity. The geographic locations of ethnic groups are fluid by nature, as these groups migrate or changes occur in the political systems governing the regions. Yet as most people recognize boundaries and territorial divides are artificial and expected to be fixed in time. According to Toft, there are three obstacles for resolving the conflicts between two asymmetrical powers: “(1) private information; (2) a committeemen problem; and (3) an indivisible issue” (p.2). Territory – an important issue for both state government and ethnic groups - falls into the third category. Landmass within a certain boundary can be ascribed another level of meaning once its people connect it with their history and culture. “No matter how barren, no territory is worthless if it is a homeland” (Toft, p.1). Conflicts are twice as
likely to occur between the political elites, who represent the state, and ethnic groups, who view the territory as their homeland, than non-ethnic related wars when a national state tries to gain control over the landmass and disfranches the locals (p.3). For the state government, the territory is inseparable because it fears to build a reputation of allowing its territory to divide up (p.26). For the ethnic groups who associate the territory with their culture and history, loosing sovereignty over the territory threatens their existence (p.19). Therefore, as Toft concludes, “if the state is dominated by one ethnic group with concerns about the integrity of the state and the defense of an ethnic historic homeland”, the ethnic group will fight against for their sovereignty; and “the state will behave like an ethnic group” to maintain control over the nation as a whole (p.10, p.32). On the other hand, conflicts are less likely to occur when “an ethnic group is willing to accept an outcome short of full independence, or if the state sees its territory as divisible” (p.32).

**Materialistic: Xinjiang as to the State Government of China**

> “Since the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-24 A.D.), it [Xinjiang] has been an inseparable part of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation.”


The Chinese government has a strong and consistent interest over maintaining tight control in Xinjiang. The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China addressed that it is the duty of all Chinese citizens to “safeguard the unification of the country and the unity of all its
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nationalities*.* In addition, the Chinese Communist Party (the CCP) has been resolute on its grip over the region. It was clearly stated in the first page of the Chinese White Paper on History and Development of Xinjiang (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, 2003) that “[Xinjiang] has been an inseparable part of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation” “since ancient time”. Similar rhetoric of Xinjiang being “an inseparable part” of the nation “since ancient time” can be found in nearly every official text concerning the province since 1959 (Bovingdon, p.24-25). Thus, the peacefulness and stability of China’s peripheries hold a symbolic position of protecting the unification of China.

Other than the ideological phrase of maintaining the security and integrity of the nation, Xinjiang constitutes one-sixth of China’s total territory, while its residents constitute about only one percent of the Chinese total population (Bovingdon, p.10). This landmass has been a large energy production region in China. Despite Xiajiang’s annual production of an estimated 40 percent of China’s coal reserves, it is unable to compete with other large coal-producing provinces (The Economist Intelligence Unit, China’s New Coal Rush & World Coal Association). With the production of 680 billion cubic feet per year, the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang currently is the second largest natural gas-producing field in China today (U.S. Energy

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10 Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, Chapter II, Article 54.


12 Although China has been trying to decrease its dependence on coal-generated energy, coal still remains the major energy source for household heating and cooking in the rural areas.
Cross-country gas pipelines connect Xinjiang to large coastal cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, transporting natural gas to the far-east places in the nation. China is a large energy consumer and producer due to its large population and high dependency of energy on its production industries. It is the world’s second-largest oil consumer, the world’s largest coal producer, and an enlarging natural gas consumer. Stability in Xinjiang is extremely desirable for the Chinese government to guarantee a stable and reliably energy supply.

In addition to its energy reserve and production, Xinjiang’s critical geographical location sets itself in a critical position in China’s Central Asia foreign relations strategies. Xinjiang used to be the commercial hub on the ancient Silk Road and the economic center connecting the Far East and Europe. Today, neighboring with eight countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, Xinjiang’s place in connecting China with other Central Asian countries is strategically located. It is the gateway of the Central Asian energy reserves to inland China (Gladney, 2004. p.115-116).\(^{13}\) The 240,000 barrels per day, and 1,384 mile-long transnational crude oil pipelines that connect Atyrau in Kazakhstan and Alashankou in the northwest corner of Xinjiang starting from 2006, are responsible for more than 10 percent of crude oil imports by China from both Russia and Kazakhstan in 2013 (EIA).\(^{14}\) These pipelines

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\(^{13}\) The “inland” region in this paper refers to eastern and central cities in China in comparison to China’s peripheries such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia.

\(^{14}\) Parts of the oil imports from Russia were also transported by another pipeline on the northeastern side from Russia to China. China receives 9% of its crude oil from Russia and 4% from Kazakhstan in 2013. China imported 395 bbl/d (thousand
are also undergoing an expansion to 400,000 barrels per day in response to an increasing demand in the Chinese market (EIA).

Map 3. The New Silk Road (Source: Wall Street Journal)

The importance of Xinjiang’s geopolitical location is crucial to Beijing not only due to its position for energy imports, but also the economic ties between eastern China and Central Asia. Beijing emphasized Xinjiang’s strategic position especially after the announcement of re-creating the trans-Eurasia ties. During his visit to Kazakhstan in 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping proposed the idea of “One Belt and One Road”, an initiative to create an economic belt from Beijing to Turkey, and a Maritime Silk Road linking ports in the South China Sea, the barrels/day) from Russia and 224 bbl/d from Kazakhstan in 2011.
Andaman Sea, and the Arabian Sea. Xinjiang’s broad landmass, energy reserves, and commercial position all demonstrate the importance to Beijing of maintaining the regional stability and security.

**Homeland: Xinjiang as to Uyghurs**

“*Immigrants are esteemed, locals despised. The owner of the house starves while the guest is full, the home’s proprietor is the servant while the alley cat is master!... Whoever bemoans the people’s crying dies easily. Whoever sells out the people wins, whoever speaks the truth has his tough cut out, whoever fixes a glance on dirty dealings has his eyes dug out.*”


Uyghurs have long historic ties with the territory of Xinjiang. Despite CCP’s rhetoric that Xinjiang has been an undivided part of China over the past two millennia, the Chinese central government ruled this region for a short amount of time. It was only until the late 19th century when the Qing Dynasty conquered this land and made it a province of its imperial domain (Han, p.41). Xinjiang fell into the hands of warlords against a central government immediately after the collapse of Qing Dynasty in 1911. In 1933, Mehmet Emin Burga, together with his two brothers, established an independent Uyghur state named Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkistan in the southern region of Xinjiang called Khashgar. Another rebellion backed by the Soviet Union soon took over control over the region in 1944 and established the second East Turkistan...
Republic (ETR) centered in the northwestern part called Ili (p.42). Decades after, the CCP gained control over the region after rounds of negotiation with the Soviet Union in 1955 after the civil war and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Until today, many pro-self-determination Uyghurs still recognize these two short-lived regimes as the first and the only government over the region with legitimacy. Many of them advocate for a reestablishment of an ETR for the Uyghurs (p.42-43).

On the other hand, Beijing’s official rhetoric of “Chinese nation” (Zhonghua Minzu) does not resonate with Uyghurs’ self-identification in Xinjiang. The survey by Yee (2003) in Xinjiang’s capital city, Urumqi, showed the differences between Han and Uyghurs over ethnic identities. The study proved that Uyghurs shared a much stronger ethnic identity than Han Chinese. More than 90 percent of Uyghurs are proud of being a Uyghur, whereas only 67 percent of Han Chinese are proud of their cultural identity (p. 438). In addition, almost all Uyghurs are proud of being a Xinjiang resident, but not as many Han Chinese feel the same way (p. 438).\(^\text{16}\) Almost all Uyghurs and Han are proud of being Chinese citizens (p. 438).\(^\text{17}\)

For the question of whether “Xinjiang has been part of China since ancient time”, less than half of Uyghurs agreed strongly with this phrase (Yee). There is a possibility that the disapproval ratings are higher in reality than the report dictates, as Yee’s study results may be skewed due to

\(^\text{16}\) 95.4 of Uyghurs are proud whereas only 78 percent of Han Chinese are proud of being a Xinjiang residence. Table 8, Yee, 2003.

\(^\text{17}\) 88.1% of Uyghurs are proud and 11.9% of them have no specific feelings; 90.2% of Han are proud and 8.8% of them have no specific feelings. Table 6, Yee, 2003.
political factors.\(^{18}\) In addition, the attitude of Han Chinese remains ambiguous as well. Although no Han Chinese openly disagreed on this statement, more than a quarter of Han do not resonate with it either (Yee, 2003, p. 439). The results of a later survey in five other cities in Xinjiang showed similar results as well (Yang, 2008). Moreover, less than half of Uyghurs considered national separatism the largest threat to regional stability and only 35 percent of them agreed separatist activities harm everyone (Yee, p.445). That is to say, Uyghurs have a much stronger collective identity as Uyghurs than as Chinese (Zhonghua Minzu), and share more emotional connections with the regional territory over the broader China. Han Chinese, on the other hand, are more enthusiastic about the unification of the nation than Uyghurs are.

**Ethnic Conflicts**

The rhetoric of one Chinese ethnicity enhanced CCP’s government credibility and facilitated Beijing’s foreign policy in many circumstances, including territorial disputes with China’s neighboring countries.\(^{19}\) On the other hand, it backfired in its domestic policies in China’s peripheries as ethnic conflicts flamed between Han and minorities. Since the establishment of the autonomous region in 1995, there have been small bouts of riots and protests by Uyghurs who advocate for more self-governance. The chain of recent large-scaled ethnic violence started in Shaoguan, Guangdong, a manufacturing city in southern China, on June 29, 2009. The riot burst when Uyghur workers at a toy factory were accused of the sexual

\(^{18}\) The political openness in Xinjiang will be discussed in the next paragraph.

\(^{19}\) Lee, Raymond. Al Jazeera
assault of their Han female coworkers. Two Uyghurs were killed and between 60 and 140 were injured during this violence (Lim & Ritzen, 2014). This incidence sparked a weeklong protest in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang, in the following week. The conflict started as a peaceful demonstration for supporting Uyghur rights across the country. However, it soon escalated into a deadly anti-Han, anti-government riot. Hundreds were dead, thousands were injured, and about another thousand were detained within several days. About 200 people died and more than 1700 injured during this incident (Lim & Ritzen).

Meanwhile, there have been large-scale violent outbreaks in other parts of the country. On October 28, 2013, a Xinjiang family of three drove a SUV through crowds in Beijing Tiananmen Square and carried out a suicidal attack on pedestrians and tourists. This incident caused 5 deaths, including the family and innocent pedestrians, and 40 injuries. A group of brutal “knife and machete-wielding” separatists raided unarmed passengers at a train station in Kunming, the capital city of China’s southwestern province Yunnan. In this particular incident 30 people were killed and more than 100 injured. Six months later another knife-wielding attack followed by a bombing at another train station in Urumqi, killed 3 people and injured almost 80 (Lim & Ritzen). Another large-scale riot between the police and Uyghurs in Xinjiang occurred in July 2014, close to 100 people died, with more injured during this incidence. In China where these large-scale brutal and hatred driven riots are rare, homicides related to Uyghur-Han ethnic

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20 The number of death and injuries in all these attacks could be higher because the Chinese government or government-controlled media provided all the tolls and there was an attendance of lowering the casualties. Min, Lim Li, and Ritzen, Yarno. "Interactive: China's Uighur Unrest." For a full list of all conflicts between 1949 and 2005.
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tensions are especially notorious. These incidents are only snapshots of the continuous violence in the country targeting innocent civilians.

As seen in the chart *Riot in Xinjiang, 2008-2013*, violent clashes between Han and Uyghurs continues after the brutal murders and slaughtering that occurred during the protest. 21 Targets of these riots and attacks shift between Han Chinese civilians, local police forces, and government officials who support the central government in Xinjiang and throughout the country. 22 Episodes of violence included attacks at police stations carried out by suicidal Islamic radicals with homemade bombs and gas cylinders. As shown in Chart 4, most of the violent incidents in the province occurred in Kashgar, Turpan, and Hotan, three regions with the highest Uyghur population and lowest economic status both among the region and in the nation.

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21 The 2009 Urumqi incidents were partially included in this chart for demonstration purposes. Source: Lee, Raymond. (February 2014). *Unrest in Xinjiang, Uyghur Province in China*. Al Jazeera Center for Studies.

22 The accuracy of this data remains questionable as the Chinese government blocked most of media channels soon after the outburst.

** Data of the Chart 4 were extracted from Lee, Raymond. (February 2014). *Unrest in Xinjiang, Uyghur Province in China*. Al Jazeera Center for Studies.
Mapping out the Conflict

Ethnic conflicts occur under three preconditions according to Stuart Kaufman: (1) there is an accepted methodology to support one group overpowering another; (2) the ethnic group percepts physical threats to their existence (whether their perception reflects the reality matters less); (3) there is a lacking of social mobilization opportunities for ethnic groups.23

Beijing created a widely accepted methodology (by Han Chinese) of Zhuanghua Minzu that disfranchised the identity of Uyghurs, which created a foundation for the Han-Uyghur conflict to grow on. In addition, two ancient independent Uyghur states were established in Hotan and broader southern Xinjiang before CCP’s governance in the region. In these places, Uyghurs’ ethnic identity is strong for historical reasons.

The large Han relocation from inland to Xinjiang encouraged by CCP during the Great Leap Forward dramatically shifted the demographic component in the region. The Han population increased from 220,000 in 1949 to 8.4 million in 2008 - a number 6.7 percent more than that of the regional population. At the same time, the Uyghur population only rose from 2.9 million to 9.8 million.24 The Han population in Xinjiang experienced a shocking 20% increase during the first couple of years of the establishment Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps between 1953 and 1964.25 For Uyghurs, Han Chinese occupied their motherland through this

23 Kaufman’s theory was mentioned by Cordell and Wolff in Ethnic Conflict. p.30-31.
24 Howell & Fan
massive scaled, government-organized immigration, threatening their physical existence. Despite the large Han immigration into the region, Kashgar (90%), Hotan (96%), and Turpan (70%) were the three districts with the highest Uyghur population until 2000. These cities also had the highest Han-Uyghur population difference in the region during the same period (Percentage of Han population in these three cities were 9%, 3%, and 24%). As a result, there has been large resistance in southern cities Kashgar and Hotan, as well as the northern district Turpan, where Uyghur populations are currently concentrated in, as showed in Map 5.

Map 5. Household Size by District

26 ibid. Table 6.3, and Table 6.4.
27 Different from Han households that are restricted by China’s long-run one child policy, households of ethnic minorities are exempted from this restriction and tend to have more than one child per family. Thus, Han households usually have 2-3 people, whereas ethnic minorities tend to have more than 3. Since there is insufficient data for regional ethnic components in Xinjiang, this paper cross-examined the household size and ethnic minority population in each district in China, with Han households tending to be smaller than those of the minorities'.
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With Han Chinese pouring into Xinjiang, Uyghurs however hardly experienced the economic benefit of the economic development promoted by the Chinese government. From 1982 to 1990, Uyghurs were the main force for the agriculture and forestry industry (84%) in the region, whereas the Han population had the higher tendency to work in manufacturing (34%). Chances for Han Chinese to become government officials were four to five times higher than that of Uyghurs. The purchasing power in southern Xinjiang, especially Kashgar and Hotan, dragged behind as the lowest position among the whole country, with between 5,000-13,000 per year as presented in Map 6.

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28 China Minority on the Move. Robyn Iredale, Naran Bilik, and Fei Guo. Table 6.2.
29 0.9% of the Uyghurs were government officials between 1980-1990, versus 3.9% to 4.5% of Han were officials. Ibid.
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On the other hand, Xinjiang’s northern city Turpan struggled less from an economic disadvantage among the region but still suffered from a tremendous amount of violent incidents, which seems less likely to brew ethnic conflicts. However, it is a different picture taking Turpan’s geographic location into consideration. This Uyghur concentrated region is located right next to Urumqi, Xinjiang’s provincial capital, where the CCP poured most of their investments and opportunities into. Turpan is only 300 miles away from Karamay, a city dominated with Han Chinese, rich in its oil reserves, and has the highest gross domestic product (GDP) and purchasing power in the region. Compared to Kashgar and Hotan, Turpan is in an even worse comparative economic position with Urumqi and Karamay close by. Uyghurs lagged behind in economic position in comparison to the well-off Han immigrants, a fact which fueled resentment because of their own socio-economic immobility; this fulfills the third condition for ethnic conflict according to Kauffman’s theory.

The Inherent Conflict

“No matter how barren, no territory is worthless if it is a homeland” (Toft, 2003, p.1). To some Uyghurs, Xinjiang is the land associated with their identity. The misperception between Han and Uyghurs are embedded in various historical aspects. Han and Uyghurs are different in appearance, language, religious practices, and live in segregated locations. On the other hand, leaders of the Chinese government have been aiming to create a unified identity of Zhonghua Minzu for decades and Uyghurs are the CCP’s main target aside from Tibetans. At the same time, the CCP also implemented repressive religious policies and committed human rights violations
against them to discourage possible threats to the current regime. Yet, results of CCP’s integration policy differed from CCP’s expectation. Not only do anti-Han sentiments among Uyghurs continue to rise, but the CCP’s policies have been viewed as human rights violations and are criticized by the international community.
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