

## Islam in China: Uyghurs in Crisis

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### Abstract

Islam has been in China for hundreds of years and has been the religion to ten people groups in China, including the Uyghur people group. The Uyghurs have been under China's domain since the mid-1700s and since then have stood out among the fifty-five recognized minority groups due to their ethnic differences in comparison to the Han majority. The Uyghurs have a rich and distinct history and cultural heritage, which is different than the Han majority culture. Since 2001 there have been campaigns to curb religious freedom in China by controlling the Uyghurs' autonomous region of Xinjiang, located in western China. The latest move to control and regulate Islam and the Uyghur people group is a multitude of reeducation camps in Western China that houses millions of the Uyghur people. A survey of Uyghur history and literature review reveal that the Uyghurs are in a crisis with a lack of religious freedom and a lack of media coverage on what is happening currently in Western China.

## Islam in China: Uyghurs in Crisis

### **Introduction**

Within the millions of people who live in mainland China, two million of the 1,339,724,852 people of China are Muslims. The Uyghurs, the second largest people group, have lived in China for centuries and have been important culturally to the Islamic community of China, Central Asia, and communities along the route of the old Silk Road. Recently, the Uyghurs have been in the global news due to a harsh set of rules and regulations forced on them by the Chinese government in one of China's current pushes against terrorism and religion. While religious freedom is nearly nonexistent in China, Islam is especially targeted by the Chinese government. However, to understand the current situation in Western China, there must be an understanding of the Uyghur's history, culture, and relationship with the Han Chinese, who have been in leadership positions in the Chinese government for a hundred years. There are not only multiple cultural and religious differences, but also an ethnic difference that has been important in the events of the last few years.

What started as regulations and policies against teaching the native Uyghur tongue in schools has now become unknown numbers of Uyghur men, women, and children in reeducation camps. These camps are hard to reach and the Chinese government halts any non-Chinese media from getting anywhere near the camps so the Uyghur's state is unknown. This is one of the most urgent human rights issues in the world currently, and it has mostly gone undocumented due to the Chinese government's ability to censor and hide what is happening in western China. To fully understand and advocate for the Uyghur people one must understand the history of Islam and the Uyghur people in China, the cultural distinctiveness of the Uyghur, and a timeline of the past fifteen years.

### **History of Islam in China: Origins to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Before delving into the current context with the Uyghurs in modern China, a survey and basic understanding of the origin of Islam in China is important. Islam was founded in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century and spread to most of the Arabian Peninsula in Muhammad's lifetime. After his death, Islam spread to Asia and Africa via trade routes on land and sea. The Silk Road was one of these routes and a Muslim legend states that Muhammad's uncle, Saad ibn Waqqas, visited China using the Silk Road on a missionary mission to meet the Chinese Emperor.<sup>1</sup> Even though there is no historical proof of this visit, there is evidence of Muslims living in China's mainland since the Tang Dynasty (A.D 618-907).<sup>2</sup> Persian and Arab merchants settled along the Silk Road and Islam spread as they married Chinese women and built mosques and Islamic communities.<sup>3</sup> The early Chinese term for Islam in China was Hui Jiao (Hui teaching) which could have come from a word describing the ancestors of the Uyghur people, but now Hui refers to the largest Muslim minority group in China, who are both ethnically Chinese and Muslim.<sup>4</sup>

There was religious tolerance in China under the Mongols, who grew in power and expanded their empire in the 1200s AD under Genghis Khan and his descendants, the Yuan dynasty. This unified most of Asia and parts of Europe under one monarch.<sup>5</sup> While this tolerance

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<sup>1</sup> Melanie Jones-Leaning and Douglas Pratt, "Islam in China: From Silk Road to Separatism," *The Muslim World* 102, no. 2 (2012): 305.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Gui Rong, "Identity, Interaction and Islamic Practice," in *Hui Muslims in China*, Current Issues in Islam (Leuven (Belgium): Leuven University Press, 2016), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Dru. C Gladney, "Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism," *The China Quarterly* 174, no. 174 (2003): 453.

<sup>5</sup> Jones-Leaning and Pratt, "Islam in China: From Silk Road to Separatism," 312.

was beneficial for all religious groups in China, the Mongol rule was also ethnically beneficial for Muslim people groups because the Mongols catered to and favored non-southern Chinese people groups.<sup>6</sup> These racial categories put Muslim groups like the Uyghurs into high positions in the Mongol government and gave them privileges that were not given to other racial groups. This allowed Muslims to build mosques and the Mongol rulers chose Muslim architects for the privilege of designing and building their palace in Beijing.<sup>7</sup> After the fall of the Mongols, during the Ming Dynasty, Muslims in China began to see themselves as both Chinese and Muslim, bridging the two cultures into one unique identity.

The 1600 and 1700s in China brought a desire for Islamic purity in Chinese Muslim communities, which strengthened Islamic identity in parts of China but this led to a desire to rule themselves under their religious laws. This was not encouraged by the Qing Dynasty, which in 1759 conquered western Xinjiang, the homeland of the Uyghurs.<sup>8</sup> The 1800s were complicated due to multiple religious rebellions involving Muslims, such as the Dongan Rebellion, which involved an Imam naming himself sultan of a new kingdom. This rebellion was squashed by the Qing rulers. The 1800s also introduced the arrival of the West onto Asian shores. Russia was expanding its empire during this time as well and soon was partially in control of the Uyghur homeland, called Russian Turkestan.<sup>9</sup>

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought drastic changes to all of China, and the communist government that was established in 1949 enforced a strict religious intolerance. This was heightened under

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.,312.

<sup>7</sup> Jones-Leaning and Pratt, "Islam in China: From Silk Road to Separatism," 312.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 316.

Chairman Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966-76) where religious buildings were destroyed or repurposed, and the youth of China were encouraged to turn religious family members over to the police.<sup>10</sup> In primarily Islamic areas of China, mosques were closed and Arabic script was forbidden.<sup>11</sup> Muslims were pushed to break Islamic dietary laws and eat pork and other unclean foods. There was a rest from the crackdowns on religion starting in the 1980s which continued well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, in the last fifteen years, there has been a revival of the old ideologies on religion, and a return to traditional policies on religious intolerance.<sup>12</sup>

### **Uyghurs in China: 6<sup>th</sup> Century to 1950s**

The Uyghur people group was first documented in written historical records in the 6<sup>th</sup> century as a people group who lived between the Turkish Empire and the Tang Dynasty's empire.<sup>13</sup> When the Turkish empire ended in the 700's the Uyghur people moved to Mongolia, as the Uyghur language and ethnicity are similar to the Turks. After a century of peace in Mongolia, the Uyghurs were driven south into Tang China by invaders.<sup>14</sup> In Tang China, they adopted the Buddhism of the Chinese and Iranians and it was not until the Qarakhanid dynasty in the 10<sup>th</sup> century that Islam was introduced to the Uyghur people. Until the 1700s, multiple tribes

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jones-Leaning and Pratt, "Islam in China: From Silk Road to Separatism," 318.

<sup>13</sup> David Brophy, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23.



of Mongols, Turks, and the ancestors of modern-day Uzbeks influenced the Uyghur people and left the Uyghurstan in a constant state of transience.<sup>15</sup>

It was in the 1700s when China entered the Uyghur narrative in a major sweep. The Qing dynasty invaded the Uyghur homeland and the Chinese have held control since the mid-1700s. The Qing rulers renamed the previously named Dzungar region or "Mogulistan Yuri yaki Yette Xeher"<sup>16</sup> in the Uyghur tongue (Mogulistan or the Land of Seven Cities) to Xinjiang, which means "new borderland".<sup>17</sup> The Chinese called the Uyghurs either Huizu or Chantou Hui, meaning turbaned Muslims<sup>18</sup>. The Qing originally tried to set up a puppet government in Xinjiang but after that failed, the Qing dynasty made Xinjiang into a military colony. Different parts of Xinjiang were separated into a northern, eastern, and southern circuits because Xinjiang became a transportation center for the Qing. However, the Uyghur people kept a system of hierarchy in the southern part of Xinjiang which the Qing set in high positions to administrate their rule.<sup>19</sup> This hierarchical method known as the beg system, had leaders in groups with each group set in charge of particular duties. Within this system, Qing China rewarded Uyghur leaders who aligned themselves with the Qing. Uyghur religious leaders were not allowed to install sharia law, but there was a legal system with Muslim judges.<sup>20</sup>

The Qing also implemented laws and rules that segregated Uyghurs from the Han Chinese. In Xinjiang, eighteen cities were set aside just for Han Chinese. Han soldiers in the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>16</sup> Ke Wang, *The East Turkestan Independence Movement, 1930s to 1940s*, trans. Carissa Fletcher (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2019), 28.

<sup>17</sup> Brophy, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Wang, *The East Turkestan Independence Movement, 1930s to 1940's*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 7.

Xinjiang were forbidden to interact or marry Uyghurs, and Han Chinese from other provinces were not allowed into the area without authorization. One of the reasonings for these rules is that the Qing was founded by Manchus, a non-Han ethnic minority, who benefited from allegiance from minorities.<sup>21</sup> Under the Qing dynasty, the Uyghur were pushed into the Chinese mainland, where they became a people who were not truly Chinese nor were they part of the majorly Muslim central Asia.<sup>22</sup> The Qing also had issues classifying the Uyghurs due to their ethnic differences from the Chinese and the Hui, the Chinese speaking Muslims of China's interior.<sup>23</sup>

In the 1800s the class system the Qing had implemented began to create tension due to exploitation of the people by high ranking officials. This along with the fear of jihad kept the Qing paying the Khanate of Kokand, modern-day Uzbekistan, to keep the Kashgar Khojas from starting jihad. The Khojas were important religious leaders to the Uyghurs and they did incite jihad in the early 1800s which was unsuccessful. Xinjiang was in a state of uprisings and chaos which escalated when a Kokand general named Yaqub Beg invaded Xinjiang. He established a regime through slaughtering Uyghurs and feigning Islamic piety.<sup>24</sup> Another source of violence and unrest was that the Qing had been using the Xinjiang area as a prison and had been sending convicted criminals there for decades.<sup>25</sup> After dismantling the Yaqub Beg regime, the Qing abandoned their policies on Uyghur separation and began to attempt to integrate them into the greater population of China. One method of integration was creating schools for Uyghur students

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>23</sup> Brophy, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Wang, *The East Turkestan Independence Movement, the 1930s to 1940s*.

<sup>25</sup> Ross Holder, "Bridging Worlds: A Comparative Study on the Effects of Ethno-Religious Policies on China's Muslims," in *Hui Muslims in China*, 2016, 37.

in hopes to educate them in the Chinese classics so they would see themselves as Chinese and that cultural assimilation into mainland Chinese culture would be possible.<sup>26</sup> There also was a removal of the beg system, which had been in place for hundreds of years.<sup>27</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Uyghurs and the Russians began a trading relationship and the Uyghur people group began to interact with other countries and ideas. Out of this exchange between cultures and countries, the Uyghur Enlightenment Period began.<sup>28</sup> This period in Uyghur history saw a widespread cultural change and an establishment of *usul ul-Jadid* or *Jadidism* (new method) schools for Islamic education.<sup>29</sup> The enlightenment's center was in the Kashgar region of Xinjiang, where there was a rise in studying abroad, especially to Russia, and inviting teachers and religious leaders from other countries to come and educate Uyghur men and youths in Islam.<sup>30</sup>

In Russia, Uyghur students began to interact with Tartars, who were also subjugated in their country. The exposure to other cultures and witnessing the freedom of Muslims in the Ottoman empire led a warlord Jin Shuren to lead the Uyghurs in an Independence movement called the Kumul Rebellion in 1931.<sup>31</sup> In southern Xinjiang, populated with mostly Uyghurs and a limited Han population, the Uyghurs tried to establish "East Turkistan" using the Islamic terminology of *jihad*. The reason that these rebellions could happen was due to the cohesion

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<sup>26</sup> Yufeng Mao, "Muslim Educational Reform in 20th-Century China: The Case of The Chengda Teachers Academy," *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident*, no. 33 (2011): 146.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>28</sup> Wang, *The East Turkestan Independence Movement, 1930s to 1940's*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Wang, *The East Turkestan Independence Movement, the 1930s to 1940s*. 25.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

under the religion of Islam. During this era, the Chinese Republic era, the power was held firmly by Han Chinese, and there was little to no industrial progress in Xinjiang.<sup>32</sup>

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought drastic changes to China as well as the Uyghur people. As China grew into a communist empire, the freedoms previously given to Islam and all other religions in China were taken away.<sup>33</sup> As China's identity changed from their ancient traditions of a dynasty, dragon throne, and the Mandate of Heaven to a communist party and socialism, the whole of China was cataclysmically changed. The new Chinese government under Chairman Mao divided China into 31 divisions in which each division would have a provincial government but be under the ultimate authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

While Mao believed that the Han Chinese were the primary people of China, he also believed that minorities should be represented.<sup>34</sup> During this era, the CCP recognized fifty-five minorities as official peoples of China, including the Uyghurs, and allotted each minority a chair in the People's Congress.<sup>35</sup> However, in order for the people to have their own province or autonomous region like Xinjiang was designated, the CCP would be able to station the People's Liberation Army in every region.<sup>36</sup> Due to these reforms, the Uyghur peoples officially had their own autonomous region and the possibility of governing themselves in alignment with Beijing. However, this was not the reality of the Uyghur people even though it had been established in official documents.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew S Erie, *China, and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and the Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 50.

<sup>34</sup> Douglas Howland, "Minority Nationalities and Territorial Sovereignty in Mao Zedong's New Democracy," *Modern China* 37, no. 2 (2011): 182.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 184.

<sup>36</sup> Howland, "Minority Nationalities and Territorial Sovereignty in Mao Zedong's New Democracy," 185.

Socialism swept through the country and in Xinjiang it meant that the corruption of the Uyghur elite was confronted. Before the communist takeover, the Uyghur people had been oppressed by their own wealthy leaders who owned almost everything and left the peasants nearly destitute.<sup>37</sup> When the CCP set up a government in Xinjiang, they took the wealth and land owned by the wealthy and redistributed it to the poor. Three wealthy Uyghur leaders were executed.<sup>38</sup> Communes were established which was disastrous because the people worked so long in the fields that it strained families, it limited access to Islamic cleansing and prayer, and it left no time for traditional arts important to Uyghur culture.<sup>39</sup> This early stage of socialism affected all people in China similarly, but the collective farms especially affected Muslims due to the required prayer times throughout the day.

### **China and Minorities**

A quick survey of the history of China and Uyghurs reveals a few patterns of how China has handled their vast country and millions of minority peoples. The Qing dynasty tried to separate the Uyghur people from the Han in an attempt to keep Islam from growing, and to keep the allegiance of non-Han people groups.<sup>40</sup> The separation of the Han and the Uyghur peoples was seen as necessary until their multiple rebellions and jihads.<sup>41</sup> After the 1800s, the declining Qing dynasty realized that if they wanted to remain in control of all the people in China that separation was not the answer. One of the Qing Dynasty's goals was to change the previously

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<sup>37</sup> Anna Hayes and Michael Clarke, eds., *Inside Xinjiang*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 118.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>40</sup> Wang, *The East Turkestan Independence Movement, 1930s to 1940's*, 119.

<sup>41</sup> Holder, "Bridging Worlds: A Comparative Study on the Effects of Ethno-Religious Policies on China's Muslims," 26.

Han-centric identity of China and change the Chinese Empire into a multiethnic conglomerate of peoples.<sup>42</sup> The Republic era in China tried to create unity and retain differences by connecting all peoples in China are all related but that all differences are in region and religion.<sup>43</sup>

When the CCP came into power, minorities were prioritized as Mao Zedong disapproved and condemned “Han Chauvinism” or the idea of Han superiority, and openly advocated that China was a diverse and multiethnic country.<sup>44</sup> However, minorities have often been subject of the CCP’s policies<sup>45</sup>, resulting in a lack of understanding between Han and the fifty-five minorities found in the China mainland.<sup>46</sup> One result of this lack of understanding is that there is a belief held by some Han Chinese that leaders need to be Han because they view Chinese history as primarily Han-centric.<sup>47</sup>

With the creation of autonomous regions, Mao believed that minorities could revolutionize China with the prospective minorities living in those regions. The Mongolians, Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Hui were all given autonomous regions with the CCP’s hope of modernization and self-government.<sup>48</sup> The CCP invested in the minority population through various training and education, and they introduced socialism into the autonomous regions in the 1950s. The minority groups that resisted these reforms and new government systems were the Tibetans and the Uyghurs. This is due to their ethnic differences from the Han and their distinct

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<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Ang, “Sinicizing the Uyghurs,” *A Journal of Social Justice* 28, no. 4 (2016): 399.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>45</sup> Howland, “Minority Nationalities and Territorial Sovereignty in Mao Zedong’s New Democracy,” 172.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

religious traditions.<sup>49</sup> The atheistic worldview and emphasis on Han culture were countercultural to both the Uyghur and the Tibetan. At first, the CCP encouraged cultural differences but when Uyghur historians started to dispute the Han Chinese narrative of Uyghur history the CCP began to set limits and boundaries on culture, and the study of Uyghur history was made illegal.<sup>50</sup>

One of the most important changes was that Mandarin Chinese was made the official language of all schools, workplaces, and in government offices.<sup>51</sup> While this did not affect many of the minorities in inland China, like the Hui Muslims of Ningxia who speak Mandarin, this did affect the Uyghur peoples because their language is so radically different due to its Turkish root. This, along with other regional bans on local history, languages, and religion continued a long history of what is known in Chinese as Hanhua, or Sinicizing minority peoples in China to be gradually one people who all reflect Han culture and Han values. From keeping minorities completely separate to the gradual, but steady change towards creating one unified people, China tends to keep their minority peoples under surveillance and with limited control over themselves and their culture.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Current Uyghur Situation**

The Uyghur people have been under Chinese control since the 1700s and have been under strict control for hundreds of years despite multiple rebellions and attempts to be independent. While the ethnic differences are important to the Uyghur narrative and situation, another important factor is that the Uyghur people group are Muslims and have been practicing Islam for hundreds of years. While their Muslim heritage was protected to a point in Qing China,

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<sup>49</sup> Howland, "Minority Nationalities and Territorial Sovereignty in Mao Zedong's New Democracy," 187.

<sup>50</sup> Ang, "Sinicizing the Uyghurs," 401.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

the CCP did not crack down on organized religion in a wide sweep until the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. Uyghurs in and outside of China in separatist groups began to hope for their own nation, "Turkestan" and the desire to rule themselves under a government that supported Islam versus openly being against any religious leanings increased.<sup>53</sup> This desire has not endeared them to the CCP, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union when all of central Asia was released to be their own countries with Islamic governments, and the Uyghurs were still under the control of China.<sup>54</sup> The ethnic peoples of Central Asia are similar to the Uyghur people, so some Uyghur people desire for Xinjiang to be separate from China.

In 1996, the Central Asian countries near Xinjiang and China signed deals with China promising not to support any Uyghur separatist groups within China or outside of China.<sup>55</sup> Due to the vast migrations of the Uyghurs, the diaspora of the Uyghur people in the past 400 years has been all over central Asia, Turkey, and in other various countries besides China. The Uyghurs outside of China have been a voice for freedom and separation for the Uyghur people. It is important to note that not all Uyghurs are united around being separate or Islamist organizations, as there are many fractions of Islam within the Uyghur people and Muslims in China as a whole.<sup>56</sup> The Uyghurs and Hui are united in a belief in a sense because both groups are Sunni Muslims, while other Muslim minorities in China such as the Kazaks who are not.<sup>57</sup> This is the delicate and complicated ethnic, religious, and political web woven in the 1990s of

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<sup>53</sup> Gladney, "Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism," 457.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 458.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 457.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



Xinjiang and complicated due to increased acts of violence and mutinies in Xinjiang in the mid-1990s. In 1996, one Iman was killed and another Iman of the Idgah Mosque was assaulted by a group of Uyghur men. It is important to note that violence is connected to separatist and religious reasons and is not the mainstream Uyghur perspective.

In response to these acts of violence, the CCP sent troops to Xinjiang in 1998 and began to round up estimated thousands of Uyghur locals and performed trials with immediate executions.<sup>58</sup> This began the “Strike Hard” campaign meant to stop and end Islamic extremism in the area. This only escalated after the September 2001 attack on the Twin Towers in the United States of America.<sup>59</sup> Shortly after the attacks in America, the Chinese government published a document called “Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by ‘Eastern Turkistan’ Organizations and their Ties with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban,” which essentially stated that multitudes of Uyghur people around the world were terrorists connected to and funded by the Islamic extremist groups of the Middle East such as Al-Qaida and the Taliban and that they were a menace to society and China.<sup>60</sup> This document also sought to blame the violence of the 1990s on this collection of terrorists. To the global media, this came as a shock and the CCP's claims were largely viewed with suspicion because students of Uyghur history and culture recognized that Uyghurs were unhappy and bitter about being under Han Chinese rule and that the violence of the 1990s seemed to be unprompted or was a reaction to CCP suppression.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Gladney, “Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism,” 458.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Sean R. Roberts, “The Biopolitics of China’s ‘War on Terror’ and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs,” *Critical Asian Studies* 50, no. 2 (2017): 232.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 233.

The Chinese government kept publishing similar documents and eventually received enough attention on the subject of Uyghurs and terrorism that the United Nations and the United States of America were convinced of its reality and recognized the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement as a terrorist movement in 2002.<sup>62</sup> This established the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement as an adversary in the Global War on Terror<sup>63</sup>, giving legitimacy to the PRC's claims and documents about the Uyghurs. This labeling has been detrimental to the Uyghur people because they have been viewed as terrorists in their homeland for eighteen years now which has deteriorated the already complicated relationship with the Han Chinese. In the course of just ten years, Uyghurs went from being labeled as separatists to terrorists with virtually no accountability for the PRC at all.

The next event in the Uyghur crisis was in 2008, the year of the Beijing Olympics. The PRC claimed to have discovered and thwarted an Uyghur terrorist threat that would have been implemented during the summer Olympics.<sup>64</sup> Soon the PRC were claiming to have stopped multiple terrorist threats from the Uyghurs which was viewed as suspicious by global media and if the PRC was truly stopping terrorism, or if this was simply for positive press engagement.<sup>65</sup> Ethnic profiling was rampant, Uyghur travel was limited and they were refused hotels and places to stay in Beijing. Tibetans were also profiled, but Uyghurs were seen as a larger threat due to their religion and the fear of Islamic extremism and terrorism.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Roberts, "The Biopolitics of China's 'War on Terror' and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs 234.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>64</sup> Kilic Burga Kanat, "' War on Terror' as a Diversionary Strategy: Personifying Minorities as Terrorists in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2012): 510.

<sup>65</sup> Roberts, "The Biopolitics of China's 'War on Terror' and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs," 237.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

This fear only grew when an outside terrorist group sent the PRC footage of bombs exploding in China as a threat due to their ill-treatment of the Uyghurs. This, and a few attacks on the police in China, cemented the idea that all Uyghurs were terrorists. The response to these attacks was that the PRC rounded up an estimated 1300 Uyghurs who were arrested for terrorism and security crimes against China.<sup>67</sup> One of the goals for this large number of Uyghurs arrested was so that the families of the "terrorists" would be punished and publicly shamed.

In 2009, the capital city of Xinjiang, Urumqi erupted in violent protests of Uyghur demonstrators resulting in estimates of 197 deaths. At the time, this was the most ethnically charged violence in the PRC's history<sup>68</sup> as the Han Chinese and Uyghurs fought in the streets of the capital for three days.<sup>69</sup> These riots were the build-up from Chinese security forces that had moved into Xinjiang and were monitoring Uyghurs.

The PRC responded to these events by essentially putting most of Xinjiang, with an emphasis on Urumqi, under martial law with heightened police and security presence. The police investigated and interrogated anyone who they suspected was involved with the riots. Some estimate that 4,000 Uyghurs were arrested two weeks after the event.<sup>70</sup> Arrests continued for months after the riots and there are still Uyghur men and women unaccounted for from these mass arrests and detainments. The PRC also shut down the internet, phone, and texting lines for almost a year, leaving Uyghurs without any mode of communication to the world and to other parts of China. It was 2010 when limited internet and phone services were provided again.<sup>71</sup> The

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<sup>67</sup> Hayes and Clarke, *Inside Xinjiang*, 67.

<sup>68</sup> Roberts, "The Biopolitics of China's 'War on Terror' and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs," 289.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Roberts, "The Biopolitics of China's 'War on Terror' and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs," 289.

2009 riot proved to be a turning point for Han Chinese and Uyghur relations. The Uyghur went from an intentionally marginalized people group to being seen as a threat due to their religion and the fear that their loyalty was to terrorist groups in the Middle East. From this point on, the PRC will no longer view the Uyghur people as a people group part of China, but as outsiders in their land.

From 2010-2013, the PRC rapidly designed and implemented extra security measures in Xinjiang, targeting religious institutions. Since the fear of Islamic terrorism was a large factor in almost all of the marginalization of the Uyghur people, mosques and other religious buildings were put under high security with guards and a multitude of security cameras were installed. The PRC advertised that they had installed 400,000 new high-grade security cameras by 2010<sup>72</sup> New rules were also established that contradicted Islamic teachings in hopes that younger Uyghurs would start to distance themselves from their culture and religion. Soon a cycle of riots with immediate suppression ensued for multiple years. Uyghur people would attack a police station or other security-based building, and the PRC would add more cameras, arrest more men and women, and increase security.<sup>73</sup> Soon the riots turned into acts of violence that mirrored terrorist attacks, which further cemented in Han Chinese minds that Uyghurs were simply Muslim terrorists.

In 2014 and 2015 the PRC began to launch campaigns that attacked and attempted to erase the Uyghurs' strong Islamic heritage. This resulted in mosque attendance being recorded and scrutinized. Houses were ransacked for Muslim artifacts and religious books, and the police tried to stop men and women from wearing traditional Islamic clothes, like prayer caps and

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<sup>72</sup>Roberts, "The Biopolitics of China's 'War on Terror' and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs 290.

<sup>73</sup> David Tobin, "A 'Struggle of Life or Death': Han and Uyghur Insecurities on China's North-West Frontier," *The China Quarterly* (2019): 3.

hijabs.<sup>74</sup> Anyone who spoke out against this war on Islam was imprisoned. Uyghur young men were made to choose between life in the Chinese police system as a security enforcer on their own people, or as convicts in prison camps.<sup>75</sup> The message that the PRC was conveying was absolute loyalty and devotion to the Chinese government was the only way to freedom and autonomy as a citizen of China. To enforce this message, the concept of “reeducating”, went from only being used in centers for people with drug substance abuse issues to the Uyghur people as a whole.<sup>76</sup>

The reeducation campaign was vigorously launched in 2017. Reports started to appear that towns in Xinjiang were slowly diminishing in population size.<sup>77</sup> Soon it was found out that the people had been placed in these centers out in Western Xinjiang. The centers for reeducation are a series of camps filled with unknown numbers of Uyghur men, women, and children along with other Muslim peoples such as Kazaks and Christians as well. These reeducation or internment camps have been set up with the intention of “de-extremizing” the Uyghur people and other ethnic and Muslim minorities.<sup>78</sup>

The global media became aware of these camps in 2017, but the PRC has denied the existence of these camps. In an interview in 2018, Chinese consul general in Kazakhstan, Zhang Wei denied the existence and stated “We do not have such an idea in China”.<sup>79</sup> Very little is

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<sup>74</sup> Roberts, “The Biopolitics of China’s ‘War on Terror’ and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs,” 290.

<sup>75</sup> Darren T. Byler, “Spirit Breaking: Uyghur Dispossession, Culture Work and Terror Capitalism in a Chinese Global City” (University of Washington, 2018), 13.

<sup>76</sup> Adrian Zenz, “Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude: China’s Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang,” *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2019): 105.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>78</sup> Tobin, “A ‘Struggle of Life or Death’: Han and Uyghur Insecurities on China’s North-West Frontier,” 4.

<sup>79</sup> Zenz, “Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude: China’s Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang,” 107.

known of what is in these camps due to lack of information and China's blockage and censorship of anything relating to Xinjiang and the Uyghurs. The current reincarnation of the reeducation camps is based on a model established in 1957 as labor camps that were advertised to help "educate through labor" or aodong jiaoyang; lao jiao in Mandarin.<sup>80</sup> No judiciary branch needed to sentence a person to the labor camps, because the police or any security entity could send people to a camp. In the 1980s lao jiao saw a revival and the PRC used them for protestors, dissenters, or anyone who challenged their leadership. Families or employers who suspected that a member was not loyal to China could even recommend people for reeducation in a lao jiao. The lao jiaos were disbanded under current CCP chairman Xi Jinping, because it seemed wrong and unmodern to be able to send people to labor camps without any legal sentence or formal court proceedings. Instead, these political reform reeducation camps have risen as the new form of reeducation centers in China.<sup>81</sup> These kinds of camps started in Tibet initially in 1996 when the CRP began to Sinicize the Tibetans by removing Buddhist religious leaders such as monks and nuns and emphasized Mandarin Chinese as their main language. The former party secretary of Tibet, Chen Quanguo, is the current party secretary of Xinjiang. It is not a coincidence that the camps have followed Chen Quanguo to Western China.

A report from one of these camps states that Uyghur people went through a fifteen-day training so they could undergo a "transformation". The 42 people in this training underwent classes on political, criminal, and marriage law, patriotic videos, and the end results were that the participants were reported to have "broken out in tears" and "repented" and "vowed to be new

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ang, "Sinicizing the Uyghurs," 405.

people”.<sup>82</sup> These testimonial style reports of highly emotional repentance of a people group mirrors the oral histories of self-criticism which were prominent during the era of Chairman Mao.<sup>83</sup> Reports over the past three to four years from various camps reveal that these camps have spread all over Xinjiang and have detained thousands of men and women. There appears to be an emphasis on how to dress in a non-Muslim fashion and sessions on how to speak in Mandarin.<sup>84</sup>

Few reports have been leaked that show the inside of these camps, and the foreign media cannot get footage without being expelled from China. The only footage of the insides of the camp have come from PRC approved tours of facilities. These reports are regarded as suspicious because the PRC denied the existence of the camps for years and there is little access to Uyghurs who are willing to say anything that would put the PRC in a negative light.

There has been international outrage over the existence of the reeducation camps, but journalists and foreigners of any kind are blocked from entering Xinjiang and updating the global media on what is happening to the Uyghurs. There is also a lack of details and numbers of how many people are detained in these camps and what is truly happening in these reeducation centers. To get any information, journalists have to contact their sources and informants without the PRC’s knowledge or it could be disastrous for the informant and there could be repercussions for the Uyghur people and others in the camps.

According to Ruth Ingram, a researcher on Human rights in China, Chinese journalists are inviting people to Xinjiang to see the camps, but the camps shown are highly regulated and a

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<sup>82</sup> Zenz, "Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude: China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang," 108.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Zenz, "Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude: China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang," 108.

smokescreen for what is truly happening in Xinjiang.<sup>85</sup> While this is one of the biggest human rights violations in recent history, there is limited information other than the disturbing facts that Uyghurs keep disappearing and are not heard from again.<sup>86</sup> There are estimates of 800,000 to 2,000,000 Uyghurs in these camps, and that the camps have expanded 400%.<sup>87</sup> Men in Xinjiang are scared because they are being targeted for the camps and now are struggling with living in a world that has become a dystopian nightmare.<sup>88</sup> Uyghur men and women are being offered money to marry into Han Chinese families, with the hopes that the Uyghur's Islamic heritage will deteriorate as they marry into other cultures.

New information on the Uyghur crisis leaks in the global stage every few months. The most current news uncovered by CNN is that now the PRC has destroyed many graves of Uyghur men and women and replaced with new graves.<sup>89</sup> Burial is an important part of the Uyghur culture, and removing a body is shameful and incredibly disrespectful for Uyghurs.<sup>90</sup> This disrespectful act was discovered by a London based Uyghur man named Aziz Isa Elkun who is banned from China. Due to this ban, Aziz could not visit his father's grave and so he would visit remotely via the internet and Google maps.<sup>91</sup> The PRC was furious at CNN, created a

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<sup>85</sup> Ruth Ingram, "How the CCP Lies About Xinjiang: The Story of Eziz," organization, *Bitterwinter.Org*, 2019, accessed February 3, 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/how-the-ccp-lies-about-xinjiang/>.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Joseph E. Fallon, "China's Crime Against Uyghurs Is a Form of Genocide," *Fourth World Journal* 18, no. 1 (2019): 82.

<sup>88</sup> Byler, "Spirit Breaking: Uyghur Dispossession, Culture Work and Terror Capitalism in a Chinese Global City," 10.

<sup>89</sup> Ruth Ingram, "Demolishing Graveyards in Xinjiang: Even Dead Uyghurs Are Now Persecuted," *Bitterwinter.Org*, 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/demolishing-graveyards-in-xinjiang/>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.



commercial campaign against Aziz, and had his elderly mother and family speak out against him on the China Global Television Network (CGTN). The CGTN doctored photos of sand dunes where they claimed that Aziz's father had been buried, and that the PRC had provided graves for him and others.<sup>92</sup> While this new development is not about the camps, it highlights how much propaganda and censorship has been used in the Uyghur narrative as a way to keep the truth of the camps and the mistreatment of the Uyghurs far from the Han and the world. The disturbing of the graves of Uyghur men and women is telling of how much of this war on the Uyghurs is centered in culture.

### **Global Response**

When the existence of these camps came into the light, the global media was outraged and indignant, especially because the PRC was so insistent that the reeducation centers did not exist. There was also frustration that this is a repeat offense, as the PRC did this in Tibet with little global flack or accountability as well. The marginalization of Uyghurs and their captivity in their homeland has especially affected China's relationship with Islamic nations, not only because of a shared religion, but also a shared ethnicity.<sup>93</sup> Turkey has been a prominent voice for Uyghur rights which has caused some tension between them as well.<sup>94</sup> The Uyghur separatist movements inside and outside of China have used their Turkish heritage to connect them to modern-day Turkey, which has angered China who does not want the Uyghurs to have their own nation out of their homeland.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Asgarov Murad, "Uyghurs in China-Turkey Relations," *Stratejik Arastirmalar Merkezi* 11, no. 43 (2019): 473.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

Global media has been quite persistent in updates, but due to the censorship and blockage of westerners to the Xinjiang region it is hard to get up to date and true information, but effort is being put into gathering information and Uyghur interviews.<sup>95</sup> However, the global public at large is still fairly uneducated about what is happening to the Uyghurs and the importance of the camps and about the lack of religious freedom in China. There is a lack of publicity and information on this that is reported in mainstream media. There is also the issue of what is being written about the Uyghur people, and the media being spread in China about the Uyghur people. Beijing is claiming that all Uyghurs are terrorists and want nothing more than to hurt the Chinese people. Every other media source is stating that the Uyghurs are a marginalized people who have been lied about and are unjustly being held in reeducation camps for the sole purpose of Sinicization<sup>96</sup> and to control and eventually end Islam in China. Overall, voices are speaking up for the injustice of the Uyghur crisis, but they are often hindered from returning to China to gather new information or the footage and interviews about the Uyghurs rarely makes it to the forefront of global news, even though this is one of the biggest humanitarian and freedom of religion crises in the past fifteen years.

### **Conclusion**

The current Uyghur crisis is complicated and multilayered with multiple perspectives and multiple governments invested in the fate of the Uyghur people. Moreover, this is more than an issue of ethnicity, but it also has a strong foundation in the religious differences of the Han Chinese and the Uyghur, which has spanned centuries. The Qing dynasty, who were also minorities in China, attempted segregation of the Uyghurs and the Han. The PRC on the other

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<sup>95</sup> Ingram, "How the CCP Lies About Xinjiang: The Story of Eziz."

<sup>96</sup> Ang, "Sinicizing the Uyghurs," 399.

hand initially attempted to merge the Uyghur culture into the greater mass of China as one culture in a multiethnic nation.<sup>97</sup>

However, this failed due to the differences and an unwillingness to become Sinicized<sup>98</sup> through schools and universities and forced "reforms." This is where the Uyghur narrative is currently, a people in reeducation camps and few advocates. The nation who they are under is actively attempting to mold them to a culture compatible with communist beliefs so there is essentially no freedom of religion for anyone, but especially Muslims. What went from an accommodation of Islam for the Uyghur and other Islamic cultures like the Hui and Kazakh has turned into separation and isolation until they align themselves to the standard of Han culture. There is nothing inherently wrong with Han culture, however, when a people group is forced to forgo centuries of cultural heritage it becomes an issue.<sup>99</sup>

There is also the added problem of Islamic extremists connecting themselves to the Uyghurs and China's reaction to the threat of violence and foreign threat. Overall, the Uyghur crisis has multiple issues involved, but one of the main problems deals with a lack of accountability for China as a nation and the need for advocacy for the Uyghur people. The reeducation camps have ripped apart families and have damaged thousands of people due to the upheaval of life and destruction of cultural and religious traditions.

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<sup>97</sup> Dru. C Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994): 96.

<sup>98</sup> Ang, "Sinicizing the Uyghurs," 400.

<sup>99</sup> Gladney, "Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism," 451.

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