

# EDUCATING XINJIANG'S UYGHURS: ACHIEVING SUCCESS OR CREATING UNREST

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Education in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has undergone dramatic changes since the beginning of the twentieth century. As China expanded its development westward, the Chinese government has made it a priority to expand public education in Xinjiang. The expansion of education in Xinjiang, especially during the beginning years of the PRC though, did not come easily. Even after the economic opening of China in the 1980s and the increase of Uyghur student enrollment rates at all levels of schooling, some Uyghurs remain unsatisfied. This essay investigates what conditions in Xinjiang's education system have caused unrest among the Uyghur community

## Introduction

The Chinese government has attempted to utilize education and the Chinese language to unify its fifty-six different ethnic groups. Problems with the development of education are, however, widespread throughout China's rural and minority areas. Many Uyghurs, one of these ethnic groups, remain uneducated past middle school, illiterate in Chinese, and are dissatisfied with education policies.

Although the Chinese government has vigorously attempted to promote education in Xinjiang, progress in minority and rural areas has lagged behind the more developed eastern China. Xinjiang's multi-ethnic composition and the political sensitivity dealing with the Uyghur minority create unique problems for Chinese-government led development programs. Many Uyghurs complain the financial costs of education are too high, language policies are unfair, and suitable work is too difficult to obtain. Although in actuality Uyghur education and employment statistics are in some respects quite comparable to Han Chinese living in western China,<sup>1</sup> some Uyghurs maintain that CCP implemented education policies suppress the Uyghur community.

This essay is divided into three main sections. First, I provide background information on the major characteristics of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs. Secondly, I present a brief history of education in Xinjiang, beginning with the formation of the People's Republic of China (1949-present). Thirdly, I use data collected during my research period<sup>2</sup> to illustrate the current attitudes among Uyghurs towards education revealing that despite progress, many Uyghurs remain discontent.

## Methodology

Data for this essay has been collected by conducting open-ended interviews and reviewing primary and secondary resources. Individuals were asked to partake in an interview concerning social and economic development in Xinjiang. If the individual agreed, he/she was provided instructions of the interview process (in English and Chinese) and was read the informed consent script. A copy of the informed consent agreement, translated into English and Chinese, was also given to the participant. After the interviewee completely understood the interview procedures, permission to begin the interview was

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1 Western China as classified in "Life in Western China" (Wang Yuan, 2006) includes Xinan, Xibei, Guangxi, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, Jiangxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, and Xinjiang. Data referring to western China throughout this essay includes the above provinces.

2 The research for this thesis was funded by a Fulbright grant and occurred between February and December 2006. I conducted research in Beijing and various cities in Xinjiang.

asked. A translator assisted for interviews in which a participant was unable to speak Chinese or English. These interview procedures were approved by the University of Virginia's Internal Review Board.

Thirty people participated in these interviews. Participants included Uyghur and Han, men and women, individuals with different ages, academic backgrounds, professions, and economic conditions. The only requirement was that participants had to be eighteen years of age or older.

Because of the political sensitivity about studying Xinjiang, anonymity of participants has been maintained. To protect participants' identities, interview answers were not audio recorded and only hand written notes were used. Furthermore, pseudonyms have been given to those participants referred to in this piece.

### **Limitations**

There are some limiting factors to this research. The sample pool used for this study is relatively small and does not reflect China's Uyghur population. The majority of Uyghurs interviewed during this study have had some university level education, a rarity among China's Uyghur population.<sup>3</sup> Although the sample used in this thesis is not representative of the current demographics of China's Uyghur population, the data nonetheless provides a unique perspective on the development of education for the Uyghur minority.

### **Xinjiang and the Uyghurs**

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is one of the most multifaceted regions in China. Situated in China's far northwestern border, Xinjiang is the largest province in China and includes one sixth of its total land area. Neighboring Mongolia to the north, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to the west, and Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to the southwest, Xinjiang shares more international borders than any other Chinese province. Domestically, Xinjiang borders Tibet, Qinghai, and Gansu.

Xinjiang's ecologic profile is diverse. Xinjiang's southern region is mountainous, with the Tian Shan Mountains in the north and the Kunlun Mountains in the southern. Between these two mountain ranges are the Tarim Basin and the Taklimakan Desert. Xinjiang's central region is situated around the city of Turpan and the Turpan basin, which is 154 meters below sea level. Xinjiang's northern region is surrounded by the Tian and Altay mountains with the Zungharian basin and the Gurbantagut Desert in between. These unique landscapes create distinct living conditions and cultures for the peoples of Xinjiang.

Natural resources are also rich in Xinjiang. Agriculturally, Xinjiang produces large amounts of grain, cotton, sugar beets, and fruits (namely grapes, cantaloupes, and pears). Since 2001, Xinjiang has had China's largest sugar beet production and one quarter of China's cotton production.<sup>4</sup> Xinjiang also contains large oil and gas reserves. According to the second national evaluation of oil and gas resources, Xinjiang has over twenty billion tons of oil reserves and over ten trillion cubic meters of natural gas.<sup>5</sup>

Xinjiang's population is also diverse. Recent census data reveals that although Xinjiang's population of approximately nineteen million is one of the more sparsely populated provinces in China, only Tibet has a higher percentage of minorities. Thirteen ethnic nationalities, most of Turkic descent, constitute nearly sixty percent of Xinjiang's total population. The largest ethnic group in Xinjiang is the Uyghurs who compose 46.4% (approximately 9,051,248 people) of Xinjiang's population in the early 2000s while

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3 Only 3.1% of China's Uyghur population over the age of fifteen has received a university education, Wang Yuan, 2006, *Life in Western*, p. 71.

4 Li Sheng (editor), 2005, *Xinjiang of China: Its Past and Present*. Urumqi, China: Xinjiang's People's Publishing House, p. 216.

5 Li Sheng, 2005, p. 3.

Han Chinese, the second largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, composes 39.0% (approximately 7,607,730 people) of the total population.<sup>6</sup> Xinjiang also contains significant numbers of Kazakhs, Tajiks, Kirghiz, and Uzbeks. Besides Tajiks who speak a Persian dialect, these ethnic minorities speak similar Turkic dialects and use simplified variations of the Arabic script. The majority of these Turkic minorities consider themselves Muslims, though the degree to which they practice Islam varies considerably.

The Uyghurs are a complex people with a rich history and will be the focus of this essay. Though the term Uyghur as it is presently used has only existed since the 1930s, “Uyghur” generally refers to the group of Turkic oasis dwellers who share a similar culture and trace their descent to the Uyghur Empire (744-840 C.E.) of northwestern Mongolia. Originally Buddhists, the Uyghurs began to convert to Islam in the twelfth century. By the fourteenth century the majority of Uyghurs had converted to Islam, and it has remained the dominant religion since. Today’s Uyghurs are mostly Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School. The practice of Sufism is also prevalent especially in southern Xinjiang.

### **A Brief History of Education in Xinjiang**

The expansion of education, especially in minority areas, did not begin to achieve success until after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Education was a priority during the initial years of the founding of the PRC in the CCP’s attempt to unify China. After a period of beneficial policies for Uyghur education, however, the decisions made during the beginning years of the PRC often inhibited the development of education.

As early as 1952, the CCP guaranteed regional ethnic autonomy for areas where minorities lived in concentrated communities. Xinjiang was established as an autonomous region at the provincial level in 1955. As an autonomous region, Xinjiang’s officials have the authority to plan social and economic development. Xinjiang’s officials also have the authority to develop Xinjiang’s education system (i.e. the establishment of schools on various levels, curriculum, and the language of instruction).<sup>7</sup>

The first eight years following the establishment of the PRC, the CCP promoted pluralistic attitudes towards minorities and the use and development of their languages. The first national conference on minority education held in 1951, implemented three major policies to promote minority languages. Zhou Minglang summarizes these policies: (1) subject courses taught in minority areas must be instructed in minority languages; (2) the creation or reform of minority language writing systems must be carried out; and (3) Chinese course offerings were to be determined by local communities.<sup>8</sup> Policies promoting minority languages allowed minorities like the Uyghurs to continue using their native language as the primary language for classroom instruction.

These policies ultimately expanded education. Figures from *Xinjiang de sanshi nian (Xinjiang after 30 years)* indicate from 1952-1958, primary school students more than doubled from 307,000 to 718,000 and the number of secondary school students surged from 16,162 to 61,000.<sup>9</sup> Although these figures suggest a remarkable increase, these statistics do not indicate what percentage of these students were minorities.

Pluralistic attitudes towards minority languages however, were only temporary. In what Zhou refers to as the Chinese-monopolistic stage (1958-1977), the CCP discouraged the use of minority languages. Zhou explains that three events in 1958, “...made bilingual education linguistically, politically, and

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6 Wang Yuan, 2006, pp. 17 and 23.

7 Wu Shi Min, 1995, *A Survey of China’s Policies Regarding the National Minorities*. Beijing: Ren Min University Press, p. 248.

8 Zhou Minglang, 2001. “The Politics of Bilingual Education and Educational Levels in Ethnic Minority Communities in China,” in *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 4(2): p. 127.

9 Benson, 2004, p. 196.

pedagogically difficult, if not impossible.”<sup>10</sup> These new attitudes had a devastating impact on education in Xinjiang.

During the “Chinese-monopolistic” stage, the written Uyghur language was altered many times. Until the CCP’s victory in 1949 and for a few years thereafter, the Uyghur language and most Turkic speaking minorities in China used Arabic script. In 1956, however, it was announced that Uyghur, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Sibo languages were to adopt the Cyrillic alphabet, the writing system used by the Soviet Union’s Turkic minorities. Although the decision to change the Uyghur script to Cyrillic carried some practical advantages by making teaching materials from Russia more available, it never gained widespread popularity among Xinjiang’s Uyghurs.

In 1958, the Uyghur script was changed again this time to a Latin transliteration similar in principle to the phonetic *pin yin* spelling of Chinese characters. The change to a Latin script had the eventual goal of creating a *lingua franca* for China. During this period, Mao Zedong also promoted the Romanization of Chinese characters. It was believed if minorities used a Romanized alphabet in their native languages they could learn Chinese pin yin with relative ease. Like the Cyrillic alphabet, though, the Latin script was unpopular among Uyghurs, and it was completely abandoned by 1984.

The shifting of the written languages for China’s Turkish minorities also mirrored Sino-Russian relations during this time. When the CCP decided to use Cyrillic alphabet, China looked to Russia as a model for communism. The decision to switch from Cyrillic to a Latin based script reflected the strained relationship between China and Russia. June Dreyer explains, “...using *pin yin* [Latin script] would serve to separate Chinese Uyghurs and Kazakhs from Uyghurs and Kazakhs who were Soviet citizens, and would render communications between them more difficult.”<sup>11</sup> By the end of the 1950s, China had broken away from the Russian model of communism in efforts to promote Chinese communism.

Multiple changes to the Uyghur written language impeded the development of education in Xinjiang. Benson explains that adopting a new written language required training new teachers and developing new teaching materials. Furthermore Benson claims that some minorities believed the inconsistent language policies, “[was] part of a deliberate effort to divide generations from each other.”<sup>12</sup> Although these claims might be unjustified, the constant changing of Uyghur script during the first fifteen years of the PRC nonetheless created illiteracy, confusion, and ultimately discontent throughout Uyghur communities.

To further complicate language policy, by the end of the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, a standardized version of Chinese (*putonghua*) was promoted. The establishment of *putonghua* was intended to replace minority languages. Dwyer explains:

The newly standardized form of Chinese...became the flagship language associated with the new China; minority languages and cultures were to be shunned as they were associated with feudalism or worse.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, all minorities were required to learn Chinese, even in areas where higher education was previously only offered in minority languages. Policies requiring minorities to learn *putonghua* prevented many minorities from receiving a higher education.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was especially detrimental to Uyghur society in Xinjiang. During the Cultural Revolution, as with the rest of China, religion was attacked by “Red Guards.” Lipman reveals:

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10 Zhou, 2004, p. 127.

11 June Dreyer, 1978, “Language Planning for China’s Ethnic Minorities,” in *Pacific Affairs*. 51(3): p. 374.

12 Benson, 2004, pp. 195-197.

13 Drwyer, 2005, p. 8

Uyghurs were not allowed to wear either their traditional *doppa* [cap] or white funeral turbans. Uyghur Islamic leaders, *mollas*, were severely attacked and forced to shave their beards; Qurans were burned, mosques were destroyed, and prayer had to be done in private.<sup>14</sup>

Religion was not the only aspect of society the Cultural Revolution affected.

The development of education also suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Most schools throughout China were closed during this period, and Rudelson claims all schools in Xinjiang were closed.<sup>15</sup> Some public schools in Xinjiang did not resume operation until 1976,<sup>16</sup> and Rudelson reports that universities were not fully reopened until 1978.<sup>17</sup>

### The Reform Period

It was not until after the Cultural Revolution and the creation of China's constitution in 1982 that policies were again enacted that benefited the development of education for Xinjiang's Uyghurs. The establishment of the nine-year compulsory education law in 1986 has been instrumental in providing elementary education throughout China. Article nine of the constitution states, "Citizens of the People's Republic of China shall have the right and duty to be educated."<sup>18</sup> The nine-year compulsory education includes six years of primary education with an additional three years of junior secondary schooling. Statistics released by the CCP's Ministry of Education (MOE) in 1995, roughly ten years after the establishment of the nine year compulsory education law, indicate student enrollment in primary schools throughout China reached 132 million, a rate of 98.5% among school aged children, and the total enrollment of junior secondary schools reached over forty-seven million, a rate of 78.4%.<sup>19</sup>

Laws have also been enacted protecting the use of minority languages for classroom instruction. The *Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (Article 12) passed at the eighth National People's Congress in 1995 states:

The Chinese language, both oral and written, shall be the basic oral and written language for education in schools and other educational institutions. Schools or other educational institutions which mainly consist of students from minority nationalities may use in education the language of the respective nationality or the native language commonly adopted in that region.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, the Ninth Five-Year Plan for China's Educational Development, to be carried out through 2010, also protects the use of minority languages. Article five Section six states, "The translation and publication of teaching materials for ethnic minority education should be ensured."<sup>21</sup>

A result of permitting the use of minority languages for classroom instruction has been the establishment of *min kao min* and *min kao han* schools. In *min kao min* schools, Chinese is taught as a second language beginning in the third year of primary school (*san nian ji*). *Min kao min* students take college entrance exams using their minority language. All minority students who graduate from a *min kao*

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14 Rudelson, 1997, p. 104.

15 Rudelson, 1997, p. 104.

16 Benson, 2004, pp. 196-197.

17 Rudelson, 1997, p. 104.

18 Ministry of Education of the PRC (MOE), 2007, "Education Law of the People's Republic of China," accessed on [http://www.moe.edu.cn/english/laws\\_e.htm](http://www.moe.edu.cn/english/laws_e.htm).

19 Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2007, "The 9th 5-Year Plan for China's Educational Development and the Development Outline by 2010," Accessed on [http://www.moe.edu.cn/english/planning\\_n.htm](http://www.moe.edu.cn/english/planning_n.htm).

20 MOE, 2007, "Education Law..."

21 MOE of the PRC, 2007, "The 9th 5-Year Plan," Accessed on [http://www.moe.edu.cn/english/planning\\_n.htm](http://www.moe.edu.cn/english/planning_n.htm).

*min* school must also pass the Chinese proficiency test (HSK) above level six to enter college, and they must retest every two years.

In contrary to what has been suggested by some Western scholars, *putonghua* is not overly emphasized in *min kao min* schools. Chinese courses begin in the third year of elementary school (*san nian ji*), but they only constitute a small portion of total classroom hours. According to the course outline for *min kao min* schools up through the sixth grade (*liu nian ji*), students only attend four hours of Chinese classes per week.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, only ten percent of total classroom time through the sixth grade is devoted to learning Chinese, while twenty-seven percent of total classroom time is spent studying one's minority language. Other subjects are also taught using minority languages.

*Min kao han* schools, on the other hand, use Chinese as the only language of instruction. "Stephen," a twenty-five year old Uyghur man from Urumqi who began learning Chinese in the third grade, explained that teachers caught using Uyghur in *min kao han* classrooms were fined 800 RMB<sup>23</sup> (\$US 100)<sup>24</sup> *Min kao han* students take their college entrance exams in Chinese. Most *min kao han* students also begin studying English in middle school.

Furthermore, laws have been passed relieving the financial burdens of education. In 1986, the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Compulsory Education* waived students' tuitions for the compulsory nine years of schooling. In addition, a 2006 law was passed promising all "miscellaneous" fees (stationery, school uniforms, insurance, regular physical examinations, quarantine, drinking water, and other school service charges) would be free, and only fees for textbooks, workbooks, and lodging (when required) would be collected.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, most ethnic minorities receive preferential treatment from institutions of higher education. First, some universities have established quotas for minority student enrollment. A professor at the Central University of Nationalities (CUN) in Beijing explained that seventy percent of CUN's total student body (approximately 20,000 students) are ethnic minorities, and nearly 1,200 of these students are Uyghur.<sup>26</sup> Barry Sautman also indicates that at Xinjiang University, "...roughly 55% of spaces in new classes are to be filled by minorities."<sup>27</sup> Secondly, minorities do not have to perform as well as Han students on their college entrance examinations (*gao kao*). A senior professor of anthropology in Beijing who specializes in Xinjiang studies explained that Uyghurs in Xinjiang only have to score 400 on their exam to attend college while Han have to score around 600.<sup>28</sup> "Bonus points" are also added to minorities' college entrance examinations. Sautman reports that depending on students' backgrounds, they can receive 10 to 100 bonus points to help improve entrance examination scores.<sup>29</sup>

Minority areas in western China also receive financial assistance from the central government that eastern provinces do not. In many cases this money is used to improve education. Beginning in 2004,

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22 Mao Gongning, 2005, *Xinjiang yanjiu wenxuelunD* (Xinjiang Research Reports)

23 Interview, October 4, 2006, Urumqi.

24 In 2007 the U.S.-Chinese exchange rate was about 8 RMB to US\$ 1.00.

25 *Xinhua*, January 17, 2007, *China abolishes tuition fees in all rural schools*. Accessed on [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/chinagate/doc/2007-01/17/content\\_785767.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/chinagate/doc/2007-01/17/content_785767.htm)

26 Interview, March 7, 2006, Beijing.

27 Barry Sautman, 1999, "Expanding Access to Higher Education for China's National Minorities: Policies of Preferential Admissions," in *China's National Minority Education: Culture, Schooling and Development*. Gerard Postiglione, editor. London and New York: Falmer Press, p. 185.

28 Interview, August 21, 2006, Beijing.

29 Sautman, 1999, p. 190.

China initiated a four-year project in China's western rural areas and will invest ten billion RMB (\$US 1.3 billion) to build and improve elementary and middle boarding schools.<sup>30</sup>

Measures passed during the Reform Era have expanding education in Xinjiang. Dru Gladney reports that from 1982 to 1990, the percentage of China's total Uyghur population who attended primary school and undergraduate college have increased from 37% to 43% and .1% to 2.1% respectively. Illiteracy levels for China's Uyghurs (those individuals six years and older who cannot read or write) from 1982 to 1990 also decreased from 45% to 26.6%.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, according to the 2006 *Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook* total enrollment at all levels of schooling have also increased. The number of elementary, middle, and high school students (including all nationalities) from 1990-2005 have increased from 1,857,246 to 2,143,833; 863,118 to 1,541,282; and 251,067 to 387,763 respectively.<sup>32</sup>

### Uyghur Dissatisfaction towards Education

Despite progress, some Uyghur remain dissatisfied with the current state of education in Xinjiang. In this section, I present the attitudes of some Uyghur towards the development of education in China. Many Uyghurs believe education costs are too expensive, Chinese language requirements and religious restrictions in schools are unfair, and suitable work is too difficult to find.

The percentage of Uyghurs receiving higher levels of education remains low. Although the number of Uyghurs completing middle school education is relatively high (33%), data reveals only 6.9% of the Uyghur population fifteen years of age and older (compared to 9.6% of Han living in western China) have graduated from high school. Furthermore, the percentage of Uyghurs over the age of fifteen who have received a university education has only increased from 2.1% in 1990 to 3.1% in 2006. Though these percentages are low, they are similar to percentages for Han and Hui.<sup>33</sup>

The low percentages of Uyghurs attending higher education can be partially attributed to the costs of education. Although laws have guaranteed free tuition and the abolishment of "miscellaneous fees," expenses still exist. These fees, although in some instances minimal, prevent many Uyghur children from attending school past the elementary and middle school level.

Nationality	Middle School	High School	College or Specialized
Uyghur	33.0%	6.9%	3.1%
Han	30.0%	9.6%	3.8%
Hui	25.7%	9.0%	3.9%

Source: Wang Yuan, 2006, *Life in Western China*, p. 71.

"Rebecca," a Uyghur woman from Korla studying in Beijing, explained that after paying for her college tuition, her parents could not afford her twin sibling's middle school tuitions (600 RMB per child/per semester). When tuition was due, her parents could only provide money for one child. As a result, one

30 *Xinhua*, December 16, 2006, "China Tightens up Security on Education Fund." Accessed on [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-12/16/content\\_760611.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-12/16/content_760611.htm)

31 Dru Gladney, 2004. *Dislocating China: Muslims Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 271-272. It must be noted though, that the language of literacy (i.e. Uyghur or Chinese was not specified).

32 Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook, 2006,

33 Wang Yuan, 2006, p. 71

child was immediately sent home from school.<sup>34</sup> “Arthur,” a Uyghur principal in *Da lang kan*, a farming village near Turpan stated students must pay a total of 100 RMB (approximately \$12.50) per semester of elementary school, 600 RMB (approximately \$75) per semester of middle school, and 1000 RMB (approximately \$130) per semester of high school. “Arthur” insisted that after completing primary school, financial difficulties forced many Uyghur children to withdraw from school.<sup>35</sup>

Recent research examining student drop-out rates in Xinjiang report similar findings. An unpublished article investigating drop-out students in Kashgar’s 51<sup>st</sup> district indicates sixty-eight percent of dropouts in that area quit because of financial difficulties, and these dropouts commonly occur during middle school.<sup>36</sup> A study conducted in *Mulaomacun*, a farming village near Kashgar, also reports that because higher education is too expensive, many families withdraw their children from school after the compulsory nine years.<sup>37</sup>

Many Uyghur parents claim they do not earn enough money to allow their children to complete high school. Since 82.1% of Uyghurs families are farmers,<sup>38</sup> yearly earnings can be inadequate. In Beijing’s *Zhong Guan Cun* district, a group of Uyghur farmers from Kashgar selling cantaloupe explained that because in Xinjiang they only earn 1,000 RMB per year, after harvest they travel to Beijing for three months in hopes of earning more money.<sup>39</sup> The salaries of these Kashgarian farmers are extremely low, and farmers elsewhere in Xinjiang do not earn much more. The average income for Xinjiang’s farmers (this includes all nationalities) is 3,220 RMB a year (approximately \$US 412).<sup>40</sup> A number of farmers in Turpan and *Da lang kan*, cities that have benefited from melon and grape growing, earn 5,000 RMB (approximately \$US 650) per year, yet they still find it difficult to provide money for their children’s educations.<sup>41</sup>

Besides economic difficulties, policies of bilingual education present obstacles for many Uyghur students. Regardless if a student is *min kao min* or *min kao han*, all minority students wanting to pursue a college education must be competent in Chinese. In fact, Dwyer reveals that since 2002 Xinjiang University, the largest University in Xinjiang, has ceased to teach any courses in the Uyghur language.<sup>42</sup> However, nearly 82% of Uyghurs over the age of fifteen are unable to read Chinese, an additional 10.8% can read Chinese with difficulty, and only 7.3% easily read Chinese.<sup>43</sup>

Many of my Uyghur informants expressed difficulties using Chinese. “Samuel,” a twenty-three year-old male journalist in Urumqi who graduated from CUN in Beijing, stated his biggest problem while studying in college was using Chinese. He explained it was especially complicated because besides Uyghur literature all courses were taught in Chinese.<sup>44</sup> “Heather,” a third-year Uyghur woman studying management in Beijing also said using Chinese has been an obstacle. She explained that because during

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34 Interview, October 30, 2006, Beijing.

35 Interview, June 21, 2006, *Da lang kan*.

36 热汗古 (Rehangu), 2006, 五十一团失学儿童现状调查报告 (An Investigative Report of the Student Drop Out Situation in Kashgar’s 51<sup>st</sup>) p. 6.

37 拜合提亚尔 (Beihtiyaer), 2004. 维吾尔族. 云南大学出版社, p. 321.

38 Wang Yuan, 2006, p. 39.

39 Interview, September 21, 2006, Zhong Guan Cun, Beijing.

40 Wang Yuan, 2006, p. 274.

41 Interviews, November 28-29, 2006, Turpan / *Da lang kan*.

42 Dwyer, 2002, pp. 39-40.

43 Wang Yuan, 2006, p. 56.

44 Interview, October 3, 2006, Urumqi, China.

high school and her first year at university she concentrated on improving her Chinese, she was unable to properly study English. Now, her English ability is not at the level of her Han classmates.<sup>45</sup>

<b>Table 2. Chinese ability of Western China's population fifteen years and older</b>			
Ethnicity	Can Read Easily	Can read with difficulty	Unable to Read
Uyghur	7.3%	10.8%	81.9%
Han	58.2%	15.8%	26.0%
Hui	56.1%	9.1%	34.8%

Source: Wang Yuan, 2006, *Life in Western China*, p. 56.

Some universities provide remedial courses for minority students. "Samuel" was accepted to a journalism school in Shanghai, though because the school required him to spend a full year studying Chinese he declined. "Samuel" explained that these courses would delay graduation by one year and ultimately require spending more money.<sup>46</sup>

Regardless of Chinese levels or remedial classes, some Uyghurs firmly believe Chinese requirements in schools are unfair. "Samuel" elegantly explained that there are nearly 10,000,000 Uyghurs in Xinjiang but we [Uyghurs] cannot use our own language. He continued, "We are all nationalities, but only in China are we [Uyghurs] a minority."<sup>47</sup> "Richard," a twenty-one year-old English major at Xinjiang Agricultural University complained, "There is no other choice but to learn Chinese. If you cannot speak Chinese, you won't be able to find a good job."<sup>48</sup>

Other Uyghurs believe learning Chinese is practical and necessary to succeed. "Ruth," a twenty-one year-old anthropology/English major from Kashgar explained that in order to communicate with people throughout China, you must know Chinese. She further commented that Chinese is useful for studying sciences and learning how to operate a computer.<sup>49</sup> "Stephen," a seventy-two year old former faculty member at the Xinjiang Science Institute explained that he believes every minority in China should diligently study Chinese because if one does not study Chinese, there is no chance to attend college and find a good job.<sup>50</sup> "Sarah," a female university student from Kashgar studying in Beijing claims, "Now, the Han population and minority population in Xinjiang are nearly equal. So, if you want to find a job in Xinjiang, the first problem is that you should be able to speak Mandarin. If you can't speak Mandarin, no one will need you [to work]."<sup>51</sup> "Daniel," a cotton farmer from *Da lang kan*, also explained that he will send both his children to *min kao han* schools, not for purpose of someday attending college but instead to learn Chinese. He explained that one's Chinese ability is most important when searching for a job.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps the most common complaint made by Uyghurs about education is that pursuing a Chinese education erodes Uyghur culture. Observations included in Dywer's research report that Uyghurs attending Chinese public schools resemble Han Chinese in the ways they speak, dress, and act.<sup>53</sup> Rudelson also illustrates that *min kao han* Uyghurs are commonly referred to by other Uyghurs as the 'fourteenth nationality,' (a reference to the original thirteen nationalities that live in Xinjiang).<sup>54</sup> Benson further notes,

45 Interview, September 28, 2006, Beijing.

46 Interview, October 3, 2006, Urumqi, China

47 Interview, October 4, 2006, Urumqi. ("在世界上，我们都是个民族，但是我们只在中国是少数民族。")

48 Interview, November 27, 2006, Urumqi. ("没办法！如果你不会说汉语，你找不到好工作。")

49 Interview, September 19, 2006, Beijing.

50 Interview, October 4, 2006, Urumqi.

51 Interview May 24, 2006, Beijing.

52 Interview, November 28, 2006, *Da lang kan*.

53 Drwyer, 2004, p. 38.

54 Rudelson, 1997, p. 128.

“...Uyghurs educated in the Chinese-language schools do not attain the same degree of facility in their native language as Uyghurs schooled in their own language.”<sup>55</sup> “Lisa,” another Uyghur woman from Kashgar studying in Beijing claims, “Now, we [Uyghurs] are increasingly forgetting our minority customs, we have become ‘Sinicized.’ Many people from childhood attend Chinese language schools, then forget their own [Uyghur] language.”<sup>56</sup> I have also encountered similar observations.

Regarding language policies, a HAN professor of minority studies in Beijing explained that altering an ethnic group’s language does not equate to changing their culture:

...the Uyghur people in history have adopted writings more than any other ethnic groups in the world, but their culture sustained. That is to say, it is no point to try to change their identity by changing their writings.<sup>57</sup>

Historically, the Uyghurs changed their written script several times.<sup>58</sup>

Restrictions placed on the practice of religion in schools also upset many Uyghur students. The CCP’s policy regarding religion clearly states that government institutions and religion are separate.<sup>59</sup> The CCP’s adopted policy on religion states, “...separation of government and religion means that religion shall not interfere in the state’s administration, judicial, and educational endeavors.”<sup>60</sup> The Education Law of the PRC reads, ‘...it is forbidden to use religion for activities impeding the implementation of compulsory education.’<sup>61</sup> It is further explained:

...it is banned to preach religion or instill religious ideas into students, to force students to follow a religion, to suspend class for collective religious activities, to put religious teachings into the curriculum, to give religious lectures, or to use religion to interfere or disrupt normal teaching order in schools.<sup>62</sup> These policies are strictly enforced in Xinjiang.

It is widely known in Xinjiang that men under the age of eighteen are forbidden to attend mosque services. Many Uyghurs believe these restrictions are unfair. “Richard” claims that Uyghur students are required to register for Friday classes to prevent them from praying at a mosque. “Raymond,” a Uyghur man from Kashgar who is on the faculty in the department of minority studies in Beijing confirms this claim.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, “Richard” explained that during the “Breaking of the Fast” to commemorate the end of the holy month of Ramadan, Xinjiang’s universities lock all gates to prevent students from participating in mosque celebrations.<sup>64</sup> “Matthew,” a twenty-four year-old Uyghur man studying Western medicine in Urumqi affirmed that he is only permitted to attend mosque on major holidays, and if he is

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55 Benson, 2004, p. 191.

56 Interview, May 24, 2006, Beijing. “现在我们越来越忘了我们的民族习惯， <<汉化>> 了。 很多人从小在汉语学校上学，然后忘了自己的语言。”

57 Email to author, April 28, 2007.

58 From the ninth century to the thirteenth century, Kashgar’s Uyghurs used the Hakaniye script which was based on the Arabic alphabet while Uyghurs based in Turpan used the Huihu script. From the fourteenth to fifteenth century, as Islam became the dominant religion in Xinjiang, the Uyghurs changed their script again, this time to Chagatai, which was composed of Arabic and Persian letters. Li Sheng, 2005, p. 65.

59 See Li Sheng, 2005, Xinjiang of China, p. 196 for an overview of CCP policy towards religion.

60 Li Sheng, 2005, Xinjiang of China, p. 196.

61 Li Sheng, 2005, p. 198.

62 Li Sheng, 2005, p. 198.

63 Interview, March 2, 2006, Beijing.

64 Interview, November 27, 2006. Urumqi.

caught going to mosque during the semester, he will be expelled.<sup>65</sup> “Alan,” a twenty-one year-old Uyghur man studying in Urumqi, also claims he will be expelled if caught attending mosque prayers. Moreover, he explained that Uyghur men are forbidden to wear *doppas* (caps commonly worn by Uyghur men) on campus.<sup>66</sup>

Uyghur students are granted more freedom to practice Islam at the Central University of Nationalities. Female Uyghur students can commonly be seen wearing traditional veils (*hijab*). I have also encountered Uyghur CUN students at *Niu Jie* Mosque in Beijing. Furthermore, Muslim students are allowed to observe Ramadan. “Ruth” explained that although CUN does not encourage students to fast, nor do they provide early meals, the administration nonetheless “turns a blind eye” to those students who choose to observe Ramadan.<sup>67</sup>

### Education and Social Mobility

Uyghur families who provide financial resources for their children to graduate high school and attend college do so in hopes their children will find suitable jobs and earn reasonable salaries. Pursuing higher education may help Uyghur children obtain a more secure future, but it does not guarantee it. Statistics from 1982-1990 suggest a correlation between the increase in public education among Uyghurs and their increase in attaining “professional” occupations.<sup>68</sup> This is the period in which *putonghua* has become the dominant language of instruction for minority schools.

Many Uyghurs complain, however, that adequate jobs in Xinjiang are scarce. In Turpan, “Joseph,” a twenty-four year old male graduate of Xinjiang University expressed his frustrations with finding a job. Speaking fluent English he explained that after nearly half a year looking, he is still unable to find a job, and he is forced to drive tourists around Turpan.<sup>69</sup> “Seth,” a middle-aged male farmer from *Da lang kan* fearing talking about anything too sensitive, hesitantly explained that education does not guarantee anything in Xinjiang. His sister graduated from a university in Urumqi (costing her over 50,000 RMB, approximately \$US 6,500) and has been looking for a job for over a year.<sup>70</sup>

Some statistics support Uyghurs’ claims of the difficulty in finding jobs. Officially Xinjiang’s unemployment rate is 4.4%<sup>71</sup> (similar to the national unemployment rate in China which is 4.6%), however, other statistics suggest Uyghur unemployment rates are much higher. Although eighty percent of Xinjiang’s Uyghurs are farmers,<sup>72</sup> urban Uyghurs have an eight percent unemployment rate.<sup>73</sup> Of these unemployed Uyghurs, 37.5% indicate they are unable to find a job in which their knowledge and ability fit the work.<sup>74</sup>

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65 Interview, August 9, 2006, *Da lang kan*.

66 Interview, June 19, 2006, Urumqi.

67 Interview, September 15, Beijing.

68 Emily Hannum, and Yu Xie, 1998, “Ethnic Stratification in Northwest China: Occupational Differences between Han Chinese and National Minorities in Xinjiang, 1982-1990,” in *Demography*. 35(3): p. 328.

69 Interview, August 10, 2006, Turpan, Xinjiang. This man drove a private taxi, “black car,” (Chinese *hei che*). These taxis are for private hire, and although common throughout China they are technically illegal as they do not pay taxes and administrative fees.

70 Interview, November 28, 2006, *Da lang kan*.

71 Xinhua, March 13, 2007. “Minister: Tough employment task ahead,” Accessed at [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-03/13/content\\_826616.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-03/13/content_826616.htm). Unemployment is based on those in urban areas actively seeking employment.

72 Wang Yun, 2006, p. 124.

73 Wang Yun, 2006, p. 105. Unemployment statistics are based on urban Uyghurs sixteen and over who are currently in the job market.

74 Wang Yuan, 2006, pp. 122-123. “找不到与自己知识能力相合应的工作。”

Some Uyghurs also attest that Han unfairly occupy most well paying jobs in Xinjiang. “April,” a twenty year-old woman from Kashgar studying in Beijing explained, “The people coming from China proper, those who do not recognize even one word of Chinese [very uneducated Chinese] manage over Uyghurs.”<sup>75</sup> Gardner Bovington expounds:

Employment disparities between the two groups [Han and Uyghur] are particularly acute in the oil industry and in private enterprises, where officials cannot impose quotas.<sup>76</sup>

A Xinjiang specialist in Beijing refutes these claims stating that even though a Han and a Uyghur graduate from college does not mean they possess identical abilities. He continued stating that employers also consider college entrance examination scores, in which, he claims, are lower for some Uyghurs than Han in Xinjiang.<sup>77</sup>

<b>Table 3. Urban Unemployment in Xinjiang</b>		
<b>(Those currently in job market)</b>		
	Employed	Unemployed
Xinjiang (total)	49.4%	4.4%
Uyghurs	40.1%	8.0%
Han (western China)	56.2%	3.4%

Source: Wang Yuan, 2006, *Life in Western China*, p. 105.

In all fairness, employment opportunities are limited throughout China. A *Xinhua* report explains the registered urban unemployment rate of 4.6%, is misleading and thirteen million jobs must be produced annually to compensate for laid-off workers, university graduates, demobilized servicemen, and migrant workers in urban areas alone.<sup>78</sup> Tian Chengping, China’s Minister of Labor, recently estimated that there will be nearly twenty-four million Chinese seeking employment this year, but only half will find a job. He also noted that 30% of college graduates cannot find jobs upon graduation.<sup>79</sup>

### Conclusion

Education development in Xinjiang has undergone dramatic changes since the beginning of the PRC. The expansion of education in Xinjiang, though, did not come easily. Changing political attitudes and relationships with foreign countries influenced the policies of the CCP during the majority of the Communist Era. This can especially be noticed in the language policies for the Uyghurs. Since the economic opening of China in the early 1980s, education in Xinjiang has expanded tremendously. Policies guaranteeing the use of minority languages and those policies that help minority students’ admissions to high school and college have benefited the Uyghur people. Because of these policies, there have been increasing numbers of Uyghur students attending all levels of schooling.

Despite these advancements, however, many Uyghurs remain unsatisfied with the current state of education development in Xinjiang. Many Uyghurs complain tuition is too expensive, language policies are unfair, religious restrictions are too harsh, and pursuing higher education does not guarantee job placement. Many of these complaints are not isolated to the Uyghur community.

<sup>75</sup> Interview, May 24, 2006, Beijing. (“从内地来的一个字也不认的汉人,都管理那些维族人…”).

<sup>76</sup> Gardner Bovington, 2004, *Autonomy In Xinjiang: Han Nationalists Imperatives and Uyghur Discontent*. China East West Center. Accessed from: [www.eastwestcenterwashington.org/publications](http://www.eastwestcenterwashington.org/publications), p. 37.

<sup>77</sup> Interview, August 21, 2006, Beijing.

<sup>78</sup> *Xinhua*, March 1, 2007, “Employment Situation Severe,” Accessed on [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-03/01/content\\_816548.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-03/01/content_816548.htm)

<sup>79</sup> Li Fangchao, March 14, 2007, “Nation faces grim job situation,” *China Daily*. Accessed on [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2007-03/14/content\\_827117\\_2.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2007-03/14/content_827117_2.htm).

Examining recent statistics reveals that with the exception of high illiteracy rates of Chinese within the Uyghur community, Uyghur high school and college attendance rates are actually comparable to those of Han living in western China, suggesting the source problem might be location as opposed to ethnicity. Regardless of the statistics, however, the current state of education remains a genuine source of discontent for many Uyghurs, and the CCP must continue to address these problems. If these problems are not solved, then China's Uyghurs will likely become a disenfranchised minority instead of an active and contributing part of Chinese society.

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