

A Letter from Kashgar: China's Wild West

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes the scenes witnessed during the author's recent visit to Kashgar, an ancient trading post along the famed Silk Road in China's far northwest. The author details the clash between two cultures, the Muslim Uighers indigenous to the region, and the immigrant Han Chinese. The author examines the effect of this cultural dialectic on the everyday lives of the locals and on society as a whole. This piece also examines the troubles Beijing has had in dealing with the specters of separatism, drug abuse, AIDS, and militant Islam, as well as the discrimination and unequal economic and social opportunities faced by Uighers.

Kashgar's old neighborhood is a feast for the senses. This central Asian city, unwilling to give up its storied history as a major trading post along the famed Silk Road, still boasts streets lined with peddlers hawking every type of product imaginable. Fur hats, pantyhose, the Koran, knives, leather shoes, lamb heads and everything else in between is for sale. Mosques, restaurants, dentists, used electronics dealers and butchers compete for space along the crowded roadside. One man, doing furious business, has taken advantage of the forgetfulness of others by selling socks outside a mosque. One by one, patrons, who must take off their shoes before entering the holy place, realize their socks are worn and join the line. He smiles a crooked grin at his neighbors, three brothers who own a restaurant their father passed down to them. It is winter and, to remind all passers that their meat is fresh, the brothers hang recently slaughtered lamb carcasses outside the entrance to their tiny eatery. The three men carve and cube the mutton, preparing it for use in shashlik, a local delicacy resembling shishkabobs without vegetables.

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The smell of bagels fills the air of the old city. Everywhere stone hearths churn out traditional Uigher bread called *naan*. While there are numerous varieties of *naan*, my favorite is the one that looks and tastes like a bagel. Surely, I wonder, I am not the first traveler to pray for cream cheese and lox in Kashgar?

Conspicuously absent from the daily markets and the famous Sunday bazaar are the Han, or the so-called, "regular" Chinese people. They remain a few blocks away shopping only at Han-owned stores and rarely mixing with Uighers or purchasing goods at Uigher markets or bazaars. Han Chinese are often wary of dealing with Muslims. The Han have a popular saying which sums up their prejudice, "Eat Uigher food, but do not listen to what Uighers say."

China's wild west is a land of contradictions. It is part of China, but few people speak Chinese. It is full of oil and gas, but few people have heat or cars. It is administered by Beijing, but the laws are not Beijing's laws. It officially runs on Beijing time, although the sun and residents still rise three hours later. This huge and sparsely inhabited territory is a place in which history and modernity, tradition and development, and Uighers and Han Chinese all clash. The result is a surreal journey through barren lands inhabited by oil pumps and camels, and red mud cities surrounded by soot covered glass and concrete skyscrapers.

SAME BED DIFFERENT DREAMS

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries control of Xinjiang, or "New Territory", has changed hands many times. Due to China's turbulent recent history the Han's ability to dominate Xinjiang has fluctuated. During three separate periods, most recently from 1944 to 1949, Uighers, a Muslim people with origins in central Asia and their own Turkic language, were able to gain independence. However, in 1949, Uigher dreams of continued self-government were crushed when a delegation of their foremost leaders died en route to negotiations with the new Communist leadership in Beijing. This mysterious plane crash dashed Uigher hopes for self-rule, as the Communists quickly moved to fill the region's power vacuum.

Despite the repression brought on by Communist control, in recent years Xinjiang has begun to benefit from its incorporation into China. The region has improved access to technology and capital, yet, has not had to face the same types of religious fundamentalism that have suffocated personal expression and limited so-

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cial development in other nearby nations. Since China's economic opening, the people of this "autonomous region" have seen a steady rise in economic opportunity. As a result, per capita incomes are rising and living standards continue to improve as the Chinese government invests millions each year to develop Xinjiang's industry and natural resources.

Due to nearly two decades of economic reform, China's demand for oil and natural gas has grown rapidly. The need for fuel has led the country to invest billions in developing Xinjiang's vast and untapped oil reserves. The Chinese government estimates that Xinjiang contains nearly forty percent of the nation's coal and twenty-five percent of total petroleum and natural gas deposits. As a result, China's Northwest, formally marginalized and neglected by Beijing, now receives government directed investment. The latest project, a \$14 billion pipeline that will pump natural gas from Xinjiang to Shanghai, is due to come on line in 2004. Consequently, new economic opportunity has brought a large influx of Han Chinese, primarily from impoverished areas in nearby provinces such as Sichuan and Gansu.

The Han come from all over China in search of new economic opportunities. They bring their language and customs, many of which are not reconcilable with Uigher traditions. Many inhabitants of this definitively Muslim land scorn Chinese alcohol, pork and prostitutes. Han immigrants, encouraged to migrate to Xinjiang by the local and central governments, often look down on Uigher customs and religion as barbarous and superstitious. As a result, friction between Uigher and Han communities has developed.

Tradition and language played a role in the mutual antagonism of the 1980s and 1990s. Chinese views on interpersonal relations, business, and modernity continued to frustrate Uighers. Often, Chinese businessmen, not unlike businessmen throughout Asia, use alcohol, sex, and expensive attire to impress and woo potential clients. Traditional Uigher dress and abstention from alcohol conflict with these accepted Han business practices. Language barriers have also prevented many Uighers, especially the less educated and poorer classes, from taking advantage of investment and employment opportunities. The result is two largely divided and unequal populations, living across the tracks from each other in a tense and bitter silence.

In Kashgar, the second largest city in Xinjiang, after the capital Urumqi, and the urban area bearing closest resemblance to its central Asian neighbors, a banner banging at one of the intersections reads, "Ardently Support the 'Three Represents.'" Next to it hangs another which reads, "Ardently Oppose the Separation of the Races.'" Unfortunately, in Kashgar, neither Jiang Zemin's oft-mentioned, ill-defined clarion call to expand the political base of the Chinese Communist Party, known as the "Three Represents," nor a call for racial integration is reflected in the lives of Kashgar's residents.

In many ways, Kashgar is a microcosm of the contradictions the entire region faces. In the city's center, an old, dilapidated Uigher neighborhood is crowded with the hustle and bustle of peddlers and purchasers, long beards and burkas and the smell of cooked mutton and *naan*. Narrow alleys and traditional Uigher structures are surrounded by the wide boulevards, neon lights and tall buildings that have become the hallmark of Chinese modernity. Chinese-style urban development, a combination of Hong Kong, Las Vegas and bathroom tile, is a strange contrast to the stone and mud structures of the old city.

It is hard to imagine what a successful unification of Uigher and Han culture would look like. Like trying to combine a donkey cart and an automobile, the pieces do not seem to fit. To say nothing of the rural areas, most of Kashgar's residents do not even speak Mandarin and, compared to the makeup and high heels of Han women, many Uigher women still dress in traditional clothing and cover their entire face.

The division between Han and Uigher communities is rarely bridged through intermarriage. Due to linguistic, cultural, and social obstacles, intermarriage is almost unheard of. While walking in old Kashgar, I met a young Uigher woman whose grandmother was Han. She was quick to point out the uniqueness of her situation. "In the past, (intermarriage) was more common but after China's economic opening most Uigher families have opposed intermarriage." She pointed out that differences, such as alcohol and pork consumption, became increasingly apparent after more profit-motivated Hans appeared. According to Wang Jianmin, a Beijing based Xinjiang expert, local governments have begun to discourage mixed marriages because of fears that they might provoke inter-racial tensions.

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SEPARATE BUT EQUAL?

Much less has been written about the hardships of Chinese Muslims than their Tibetan neighbors. Indeed, Assistant Secretary of State Lorne Craner's recent visit to this often forgotten region has increased awareness and concern over the state of affairs in China's Northwest. While Xinjiang has repeatedly been the focus of human rights activists' criticisms, the lack of a single spiritual leader, like the Dalai Lama, and the region's close proximity to the grandeur of the Tibetan plateau, keep it largely anathema to Westerners.

Most Uighers remain, perhaps because of the mystical and moderate form of Sufi Islam they practice, largely divorced from Islamic fundamentalist movements and the political concerns of Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq. But the global crackdown on terror has touched Kashgar. A US Naval Intelligence official who interrogated Uighers in Cuba claims three hundred to six hundred Uighers fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan and between two and fifteen are being held by the United States in Guantanamo Bay. These facts, and sporadic separatist plots in China, encouraged the United States to place a Uigher separatist group, the East Turkistan Independence Movement (ETIM), on its list of global terrorist organizations. However, while much has been made publicly of the US and China's cooperation in combating terrorists, reports on China's treatment of Uighers are considerably fewer.

Recent reports on Xinjiang have focused on the Chinese central governments's "Strike Hard" campaign. Just before the September 11th attacks, the government called for Chinese law enforcement to crackdown on terrorism and crime. In addition, new laws blurring the line between legal protest and separatist activity have been implemented. But surprisingly, Uighers with whom I spoke did not feel that the events of September 11th and the subsequent crackdown had deeply affected their lives.

A long time resident of Kashgar explained, "Our lives have not changed, the unequal treatment of Uighers in Kashgar has existed for years. I have read about the September 11th attacks, but that is far from here." In truth, a crackdown on separatists affects a minute section of Xinjiang's Uighers. The vast majority of Muslims are much more concerned about the unequal distribution of economic opportunities and fair implementation of the laws. In the shadow of Mao's towering figure one cab driver in Kashgar ex-

plained, "If there is a fight between a Han and a Uigher, it does not matter who is responsible, the Uigher will be fined or arrested. Economic opportunities are also unfair. The Hans control the work units. The more Hans come (to Kashgar) the more tall buildings go up, the more Uighers are looked down on."

There is no doubt that there exists a great deal of resentment of wealthy, atheist Hans in poor, Muslim Kashgar. However, unlike the rest of China, where average people are eager to talk politics, place blame and criticize leaders, Uighers, even when prompted, often flatly refuse to discuss such topics, both in public and private. This is for good reason. Xinjiang is widely accepted as the only place in China where private political conversations can carry a death sentence. In the ancient city of Turfan, famous for its vineyards and revolutionary irrigation system, a local man, standing just outside of a mosque explained in a whisper, "We have had men taken away and have been warned not to talk to Westerners. We are not free to talk openly. I want to, but I am afraid." He quickly changed the subject.

Uigher leaders are at a difficult crossroads. They must choose full integration into the Chinese system, their own legally separate system and land, (similar to an American Indian reservation) or armed revolt bent on independence. All of these positions have significant drawbacks.

Full integration would bring the most obvious economic benefits but would be tantamount to cultural suicide. Separation within the Chinese state might preserve Uigher culture but would keep Uighers poor and largely agrarian. Uighers risk becoming an emasculated, non-threatening sideshow perfect for tourists' snapshots. This type of state sponsored pacification, sometimes denounced as "Disneyfication," is already seen in Tibet, where the Chinese government has been extremely successful in using tourism to exploit Tibetan culture for economic gain.

Real independence is a non-starter for almost all Uighers. Even if independence were achievable, which is extremely doubtful, the combination of economically struggling Central-Asian states and a chaotic and oil-rich Xinjiang with a power vacuum would almost certainly lead to even greater problems. More to the point, the central Chinese state would undoubtedly use whatever force is necessary to maintain national unity.

The choice between assimilation and "Disneyfication" will continue to be heartbreaking for Uigher parents. Uighers will have to

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decide either to let their children develop Han values, language and customs—reap the economic benefits—or allow them to become the focus of cameras, tours and info sessions, while they struggle to make a living. The latter choice, a sort of colonial Williamsburg for Uighers, risks becoming similar to Native American reservations, where education standards remain low and drug use high.

A hybrid system where Uighers, in order to preserve their own cultural identity, receive affirmative action, has also been suggested. An example of this is the preferential treatment currently afforded to Uighers and other minorities in university admissions. Unfortunately, many Uighers arrive at university and find themselves far behind their Han classmates. Before attempting classes in either English or Chinese they must first struggle to improve their Chinese, a process that often takes at least a year of constant study and rote memorization. Chinese history is dotted with minority groups, like the Mongols and Manchus, who attempted to coexist with Han Chinese culture. In the long run, these dual-systems proved unsustainable and both were gradually assimilated into the Chinese framework.

The signs of increased integration are beginning to appear in Xinjiang. There is a Uigher group that only speaks Chinese called the “14th minority.” In Urumqi, there are increasing numbers of mixed friendships and businesses aiding to a furious pace of economic development within Xinjiang’s capital city. Economic advancement in Xinjiang remains one area where Uigher and Han do agree. Unfortunately, the externalities that result remain a subject of constant debate.

AIDS AND DRUGS

Xinjiang’s long and storied history along the Silk Road has brought many travelers through the region. Unfortunately, many of today’s travelers also bring with them the deadly HIV virus. Beijing’s drive to develop Xinjiang has led to an influx of soldiers, truckers and prostitutes. Not surprisingly some of the highest AIDS infection rates in China are among these three groups. The risk also grows as workers arrive, since male migrants who travel to Xinjiang have a much greater chance of engaging in premarital sex than a man who remains in his own village. Ignorance, limited resources and cultural norms make sex education throughout China’s western regions difficult and rare.

Additionally, early detection of the virus is extremely difficult. HIV cases are only reported when one is arrested and tested or when the final stages of the virus demand medical attention. As such, the true number of people infected could be much greater than the government's figure, making treatment and prevention problematic.

Dr. Justin Rudleson, an expert on Xinjiang, believes inadequate treatment facilities and the unavailability of effective AIDS medication will ultimately lead to social unrest and large protests throughout Xinjiang. Rudleson also claims that concern for AIDS may galvanize and unite Uigher and Han communities. "With AIDS as a common enemy threatening the entire region, cooperation," Rudleson argues, "may be the only way to effectively combat the spread of this deadly virus. Economic development may be supported by all, but the nature of that development is constantly disputed. The AIDS' threat is much easier to grasp and leaves little room for debate among average people," he added.

However, because of limited contact between Hans and Uighers, these groups rarely contract AIDS through intimate relations with each other. Instead, heroin is the primary conduit for Uigher infection. It is almost impossible to determine the amount of heroin used in Xinjiang. Imports from Afghanistan and Burma make heroin an easy and relatively cheap high. In the past, Afghani heroin producers targeted consumers in Europe and America, however, if suppliers turn east to neighboring Xinjiang, they may find a population ignorant of the drug's harms and increasingly able to afford it. Unfortunately, the reuse of syringes transmits the virus. Thus, AIDS continues to spread as thousands unknowingly pass the disease to their families and friends.

In 1998, when I was studying in Beijing, our campus bordered a section of town known as "Uigher Street." The area was famous for its authentic Uigher food, lively street traffic and, to the authority's dismay, availability of drugs. Through the bustling corridor, the muffled whisper, "hashish, hashish," would waft through the air along with the smell of charred mutton skewers. A step off the street revealed the ancient alleys unique to Beijing and the syringes that dotted their narrow pathways.

In 2001, I returned to find Uigher Street destroyed, the victim of Beijing's furious cleanup before the Olympic evaluation committee's arrival. However, the destruction was merely a façade. Within the narrow back alleys, the Uigher restaurants thrived and

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so did the drug trade. It was not until I passed through the area on this trip that I realized that Beijing's goal was not to hide its Uighers, but to force them out.

The inner alleys that had bustled were now inhabited by only a handful of restaurants, a gang of children and men either unwilling or unable to leave. Behind them, migrant workers were knocking down neighborhood homes and businesses. Children were playing on the bricks that had been their homes. A man commented, "The police blame us for everything and people never give us a chance, and now we must return to Xinjiang." A woman standing with her children was surprisingly candid, "I brought my children to Beijing so they would have an opportunity to learn Chinese and go to school. Although they have schools in Xinjiang, what hope do they have without knowing Chinese?" She spoke in a filthy alley, no doubt understanding that while the pile of bricks to her right was the past, the syringes beneath their feet could be her children's future.

After our talk, I hailed a cab. Immediately, from a tiny red hatchback, like clowns from a circus car, five Uigher youths poured out. I hopped in the cab and within moments the cab driver explained that his previous passengers were "*liu mang*," (hoodlums) who, "*nao shi*," (cause trouble) and "*mai dupin*," (sell drugs). This local Beijing man also explained that while he had never seen these young men before, Uighers had, "been causing trouble in Beijing for years. I am happy the Beijing government finally destroyed Uigher Street," he said, "Uighers are nothing but trouble."

Currently, the Uighers of Xinjiang face a plethora of issues that continue to erode their chances for economic and social stability. Questions concerning discrimination, assimilation, isolation, and AIDS will continue to plague the people of Xinjiang.

The Uigher culture is a unique blend of Eastern and Central Asian traditions that ought not be railroaded into extinction. While investment continues to be directed into Xinjiang, most funding is targeted at the development of large-scale industry. According to the Chinese government oil exploitation, petrochemicals, machinery and forestry are among the region's, "pillar industries." In 2001, mining output alone reached \$3.5 billion. Yet, together the Uighers and Han must find a way to preserve Uigher traditions while providing opportunities for local economic development. Textile and agricultural production, for example, could be areas for future grassroots development.

“Has he (President Bush) found Bin Laden yet?” asked a smirking young mutton dealer in excellent Chinese, “Before he goes to Iraq why not first find Bin Laden, we know what Bin Laden has done, what has Iraq done?” Whether you agree with his statement or not, Uighers, especially those in urban centers, are beginning to develop a global consciousness. More and more they are being exposed to the political and economic influence of both East and West. This gives Beijing the opportunity to show the world that Chinese modernization is not merely limited to cities on its eastern coast or to Han Chinese. Political and economic development will improve the lives of the Uigher people and affirm the effectiveness of the PRC’s Western development strategy. The young mutton dealer said it best, “I don’t want to sell mutton forever, I want to study in Beijing or America, my friends agree, Xinjiang is slowly getting better, but the real opportunities are still in the East.”

Although the process will be fraught with difficulty, observers will almost certainly see the increased assimilation of Uighers into mainstream Chinese society. The siren song of economic opportunity will continue to woo Uighers; especially those who are more secularized and residing in urban areas. Yet, where the vast majority may see a chance for success, extremists see a threat. Increased investment and preferential economic policies will act as a double-edged sword. On one side, they will better the lives of average Xinjiang people, on the other, they will attract more Han Chinese and provoke racial and AIDS related tensions. This dialectic between modernity and tradition is not unique to Xinjiang; all societies have had to adjust to a changing environment. But China can still prevent conflict if its policies are inclusive and flexible. Rather than slogans and banners, Uighers need options. Only when Uighers are given the ability to choose their own fate will extremism in Xinjiang be defeated. Beijing ought to evaluate Xinjiang’s complex internal dynamics, and while there will inevitably be a minority of radicals, China must resist the temptation to paint all Uighers with the same brush of extremism.