

Economic Incentives Preempt Independence Movements: A Case Study of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China

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Introduction

Self-determination and freedom from foreign territorial acquisition and annexation still are core issues in the international arena and a source of human rights struggles. Through the consolidation of economies in the twenty-first century, there has, however, been a shift in the importance of these issues and in the meaning of “occupied” territories. This paper challenges the idea that the status quo of self-determination is the most important element of the human rights agenda of the indigenous Uyghur community in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of Western China. Economic development and justice are more important to the Uyghurs. By addressing economic and social demands, China can curb separatist desires and civil unrest in Xinjiang. An analysis of the current education system and popular culture will demonstrate the responsiveness of the Uyghur youth to the possibility of achieving economic prosperity rather than pursuing a path of independence.

Self-Determination as a Human Right

The United Nations General Assembly has addressed the topic of indigenous rights to self-determination, because that issue has been at the forefront of several national and international conflicts throughout history. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples both explicitly describe the right of self-determination and freedom from foreign intervention. The rights granted in these international instruments are intended to promote freedom from oppressive regimes that annex or occupy territories inhabited by indigenous populations.

In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of Western China, these liberties have been in dispute for over a half-century. From the 1950s, when the People’s Liberation Army took control of the region, up through current events, such as the summer uprising of 2009, there has been a history of political and social discontent with the Chinese government’s influence over the region. There is no question that political independence is important for the Uyghur community. Political independence can provide better conditions for citizens and potentially strengthen a society. There are tangible economic and political issues that affect societies’ capacity for prosperity when political independence is at stake. For example, without autonomy, there is no opportunity for democratic political representation or economic distributive justice. Both of these examples can be observed in the XUAR.

The Chinese government’s response to the Uyghurs’ dissatisfaction with the current situation has been violent confrontation. This has escalated the hostility toward the government and has made the situation even more volatile. The government shows no sign of willingness to negotiate any demands over territory, and the radical elements of the Uyghur population show no sign of backing down. There can, however, be a compromise forged between the Chinese government and the younger Uyghurs. The Chinese government can deflect the secessionist desires of the population by offering economic opportunities and social inclusion to the younger generation of Uyghurs. Those younger Uyghurs have shown a more positive response to Chinese policies that are more open to their inclusion, a tendency that can be observed in the current trends in education and pop culture.

The youth have an inclination towards being educated in Han Chinese (the ethnic majority in China) schools, rather than Uyghur schools, and prefer music that is apolitical, as opposed to the politically charged songs that were popular during the 1990s. These social trends point to the next generation of Uyghurs' responsiveness to modernity and unity, rather than opposition and resistance to the past.

Education

The education choices for Uyghur students are another indicator of a changing population. The current education system in China entails a trilingual policy for minority students, who are to be taught in their ethnic language during primary school and in Chinese during secondary, while also learning English in order to complete proficiency requirements for post-secondary schools. This system handicaps Uyghur students who must learn three languages during the course of their studies, and who are often taught Chinese by Uyghur teachers who do not have a strong background in the language.

There is also a disparity in the quality of education between *minkaoban* and *minkaomin* schools. *Minkaoban* are Uyghurs who are taught in Han schools, and *minkaomin* are Uyghurs who are taught in Uyghur schools. The utility of the education received in *minkaomin* schools is minimal, as these schools do not adequately prepare students for higher education in Han schools and are often based on cultural and religious teachings rather than practical topics. There is a current tendency for Uyghur students to prefer Han Chinese education.

Pop Music

Preferences in popular music in Xinjiang have changed over the past two decades, as the youth choose to listen to and support artists who are not critical of the Chinese government. This is contrary to the previous generations, which followed artists such as Askar, the singer of the most popular Uyghur rock group of the 1990s. Askar's band, Grey Wolf, gained international attention for their advocacy of Uyghur independence and nationalism. The anti-Han sentiments are prevalent in Askar's lyrics, such as in the song "Play," where Askar appeals to Uyghurs to unite and rid Xinjiang of the "stinky air" that is ruining their homeland. The stinky air is an allegory of the Han Chinese and their culture.

Askar and Grey Wolf have increasingly lost their popularity among the younger Uyghurs, who have begun listening to artists, such as Arken, whose songs are about contentment and enjoying life. Arken is fifteen years younger than Askar, and his support among the younger demographic reflects his appeal to adolescent Uyghurs. Arken's music videos are regularly aired on MTV, and he has become a pop icon since the 2000s. His songs, such as the popular love song "Boy," are devoid of controversial themes and contain lyrics in Chinese—even though Arken was educated in Uyghur schools and did not learn Chinese until he was an adult. In a survey of four colleges and universities in China, one in Xinjiang and three elsewhere, there were significant correlations in musical preference among students. Arken was preferred over Askar and the students stated they preferred non-politicized music.

Final Remarks

In order to quell the separatist sentiments within the Uyghur community in Xinjiang, the Chinese government could offer alternatives to the currently bleak economic future of the younger generation. Currently, Uyghurs are disproportionately underrepresented in political offices and less employed in industries. A uniform education system for students would alleviate the inequality of skills attainment and prepare the next generation's workforce and leaders. There must be equal hiring practices for industries in Xinjiang, which could be enacted through a policy of equal opportunity and adequate incentives.

It is in the Chinese government's best interest to work towards the improvement of the Uyghur community and to work with Uyghurs as part of a larger society rather than oppose and marginalize them. The opportunity is present but it will require the will of policymakers in Beijing to promote economic development for the Uyghurs rather than a reactionary policy of containing opposition.

Annotated Bibliography

Adamson, Bob, and Feng Anwei. 2009. "A Comparison of Trilingual Education Policies for Ethnic Minorities in China." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative & International Education* 39 (3): 321-333.

Annotation: This article outlines the difficulties of China's "trilingual" language policy for minority students. Historically, China has gone through different levels of tolerance, promotion, and opposition to minority languages being taught in schools. At first, the Chinese Communist Party was highly supportive of minorities and their desire to teach their children their mother tongue. Around the time of the Cultural Revolution, this advocacy turned to backlash as priorities were changed to promote state unity and assimilation. The current situation has been further complicated as the Chinese government is again supporting minorities' right to pass on their language while also trying to promote economic development across the country. The problem lies in the fact that there must be a uniform state language, respect for minorities' cultures, and a workforce that can communicate internationally through the use of English. This creates the problem of trilingual proficiency for minorities. Minority students find themselves in a predicament, using their native language for their primary education, learning the state language in secondary school, and having to know English for any type of higher education.

Anonymous. 1999. "Forgotten Province: China's Oppression furthers Uyghur Separatist Sentiment." *New Internationalist* (318). Available online: <http://www.newint.org/issue318/update.htm>.

Annotation: This article recounts a briefing to the United States Congress by Amnesty International describing the human rights violations taking place in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The title of this piece is taken from the Amnesty International USA director, who calls XUAR the "forgotten province," due to the tough travel and security measures placed on the region. Forced abortions, economic oppression, resource gouging, little to no political representation, unequal hiring practices, government-sponsored Han migration, execution of political prisoners, torture, and rape are described in

witness testimonies. The article describes how the Uyghurs draw inspiration from the liberation of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan from the former Soviet Union in their own struggle for independence.

Baranovitch, Nimrod. 2003. "From the Margins to the Centre: The Uyghur Challenge in Beijing." *The China Quarterly* (175): 726-750.

Annotation: This article discusses the small but influential Uyghur population that resides in China's capital, Beijing, and their important role as representatives of their ethnic minority to the Chinese people. Highlighted within this article are examples of business owners, artists, and politically influential Uyghurs who have transcended their ethnic class, impacting views of their heritage among Chinese Han and worldwide.. This article demonstrates how internal migrants in China have the ability to achieve class ascension within Chinese society. Baranovitch portrays China in a different light, demonstrating how there are opportunities for individualism and national and ethnic pride within the Chinese system.

———. 2007. "From Resistance To Adaptation: Uyghur Popular Music and Changing Attitudes Among Uyghur Youth." *China Journal* (58): 59-82.

Annotation: This article demonstrates the shift of Uyghur youth's musical preference from political and nationalistic songs of resistance and oppression that were popular during the 1990s to the apolitical and "everything's okay" attitudes that are prevalent in Uyghur pop music today. The author attributes this to several factors, including: China's suppression of the Uyghur resistance songs; Uyghur youth's desire to connect outwardly to the rest of the world; and the new Uyghur generation's desire to advance within the Chinese system rather than confronting it. The author references a survey of Uyghur university students who liked the new, apolitical style and singers rather than the nationalistic and opposition style popular among the older generation. The results, the author suggests, represent the Uyghur youth's desire for modernity and contentment rather than independence and ethnic divisions.

Barber, Hollis W. 1975. "Decolonization: The Committee of Twenty-Four." *World Affairs* 138 (2): 128.

Annotation: This article describes the Committee of Twenty-Four's attempts in the 1960s to promote nations' rights for self-determination and independence. The committee, also known as the Committee on Decolonization, was created in 1961 by the United Nations General Assembly in order to implement the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The committee was highly critical of Western states' claims over minority populations and colonies, such as Puerto Rico, Rhodesia, and South Africa. The same criticisms were not directed at developing countries' claims over territories that they felt were rightfully theirs,

such as China's claims to Hong Kong and Macau, which were claimed by Britain and Portugal.

Beller-Hann, I. 2001. "Making the Oil Fragrant?: Dealings with the Supernatural among the Uyghurs in Xinjiang." *Asian Ethnicity* 2 (1): 9-23.

Annotation: This article describes the Uyghur traditions surrounding death through the scope of Islamic and ethnic traditions. The author describes how the rituals practiced by the Uyghurs are a combination of local customs and traditional Islamic beliefs. The Uyghurs are allowed to practice their traditions by the Chinese government because it is seen as adding to the ethnic diversity of China's population. The rituals practiced by Chinese ethnic minorities that are deemed harmless to the dominant culture are actually promoted and even romanticized by the government, in what the author calls the "folklorisation" of local customs. The Chinese government does, however, discourage the practice of Islam, as it is viewed as being incompatible with China's Communist ideology and supportive of separatism.

Bob, Clifford. 2002. "Merchants of Morality." *Foreign Policy* (129): 36-45.

Annotation: This article describes the trend of indigenous rights movements compromising their ideals in order to draw international attention and funding for their organizations. The author argues that these groups compromise their principles and alienate the people they are supposed to represent in the process of pandering for monetary contributions, recognition, and support. The author makes the point that support for indigenous rights groups is not based on the justness of their cause, but rather on their public relations apparatus and popularity among celebrities. He uses the example of the popularity of the Tibetan cause for greater autonomy from the Chinese government compared to the similar struggle of the Uyghurs, who are not as popular and thus are less publicized.

Bovingdon, Gardner. 2002. "The Not-So-Silent Majority: Uyghur Resistance to Han Rule in Xinjiang." *Modern China* 28 (1): 39.

Annotation: In this article, the author describes the hostilities between the indigenous Uyghurs and the migrant Han in China's Xinjiang region. The author claims that the problems between the two ethnic groups can be attributed to a lack of understanding of the Uyghurs' grievances and their desire for a separate nation-state. He claims that the situation is exacerbated by suppression of Uyghur dissent through classification as sympathizing with separatists. The Uyghurs, however, have found alternative forms of expressing their grievances—through nuanced messages in music and conversations and debates in their native language, for example—in what has been termed, "infra-politics."

Box, Dan. 2003. "Xinjiang." *Ecologist* 33 (7): 20-22.

Annotation: In this article, the author describes the impact of oil drilling on the Uyghur population of Kashgar in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in northwestern China. Caught between foreign and Chinese drilling interests, the Uyghurs have been subjected to political, religious, linguistic, and educational oppression by the Chinese government. The name of Xinjiang Autonomous Region is only a façade, as the region is under the strict and total control of the Chinese. The Uyghurs feel their heritage will soon be lost as they are forced to assimilate and integrate into Chinese culture. This is especially difficult for the Uyghur youth, who feel they must make a choice between their culture and the opportunity for a better life in Chinese society.

Caplan, Richard. 1998. "International Diplomacy and the Crisis in Kosovo." *International Affairs*, Royal Institute of International Affairs 74 (4): 745-761.

Annotation: In this article, the author contends that the conflict in Kosovo in the 1990s was due to a lack of international participation and recognition of the ethnic Albanians' claim to autonomy over the Kosovo region. The author's argument is that diplomacy and recognition of Kosovo as an autonomous region by the international community could have prevented the ethnic clashes that occurred there. The author claims that the lack of redress of the ethnic Albanians' grievances left the conflict to "smolder." The Serbian forces that invaded the area were claiming they were protecting the ethnic Serbs from the ethnic Albanians who were committing violence against them. The author contends that international powers could have quelled the violent spats before there was an all-out assault on the Albanians by Serb military forces.

Davis, Elizabeth Van Wie. 2008. "Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China." *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 35 (1): 15-30.

Annotation: This article describes the influence of Islamic separatist movements in Central Asia on the current unrest in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The author makes the point that the extraction of oil from the XUAR, in addition to the fact that few of the remittances reach the Uyghurs there, fuels the unrest and compounds the already problematic separatist movements in the region. The international cooperation and expedition treaties between China the Central Asian countries—such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—fuel the Islamic separatist movements. The economic ties between these countries and China also allow for easier movement of fighters, arms, and propaganda, as roads and other transportation avenues are opened for easier access between states.

Diehl, Keila. 2005. "Central Asia: China: Regions: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," in Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd/Books.

Annotation: This article describes the importance of musical tradition for the Uyghur ethnic group in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The author describes how music plays an intricate role in Uyghur society as a form of cultural continuity. The music in the XUAR has been historically repressed and censored by Chinese authorities with the aim of silencing discontent within Uyghur society. There have been, however, instances where the music released by Uyghur artists has made references to the oppression and violence the Uyghurs face in the XUAR. These messages must be carefully orchestrated in metaphors and allegories, as there is the danger of being targeted by Chinese authorities as a separatist and for breeding discontent among the Uyghurs.

Finley, Joanne Smith. 2007. "Chinese Oppression in Xinjiang, Middle Eastern Conflicts and Global Islamic Solidarities among the Uyghurs." *Journal of Contemporary China* 16 (53): 627-654.

Annotation: This article describes the formation of Uyghur identity through the "Islamification" of the ethnic minority group in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in northwestern China. The Uyghurs have historically avoided mixing or assimilating with the Han Chinese as a form of protection against losing their culture and symbolically opposing Chinese rule over their indigenous homeland. With internal and external world developments, the Uyghurs have, in the past few decades, turned toward Islam as a way to distinguish themselves from the Chinese. The Chinese, in turn, have used this "Islamification" of the Uyghurs as an excuse to crush any type of resistance to Chinese rule as part of the "War on Terror." Chinese authorities claim all opposition as being supported by outside Muslim extremist groups.

Gladney, Dru C. 1997. "Rumblings from the Uyghur." *Current History* 96 (611): 287.

Annotation: This article describes the two-pronged approach that the Chinese government is taking toward the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) economic development and political oppression. While the XUAR is an oil-producing region, the economic well-being of the indigenous Uyghur peoples is not rising. Their job market has been flooded by migrant Han Chinese, who have an advantage in getting jobs, as they are better educated and receive preferential treatment. In response to this type of discrimination in what they feel is their homeland, Uyghur separatists used bombings and assassinations to cause trouble for Chinese interests in the region during the 1990s. The result was a Chinese policy of "striking hard," leading to hundreds of arrests, as well as executions of suspected separatists. The author contends that there is a possibility of reconciliation if the Uyghur receive benefits from economic development.

———. 2003. "Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism?" *The China Quarterly* (174): 451-467.

Annotation: This article outlines the history of Muslims in China and their struggle to preserve their religion, heritage, and cultural identity in the face of hostility on the part of the Chinese. Islam is not seen as compatible with the Communist ideology of the Chinese government. The hostility toward Islam in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has increased significantly since the beginning of the 2000s after the start of the “War on Terror.” The Chinese government now justifies religious discrimination and oppression of Muslims as a battle against internal and external separatist extremists who must be crushed. The author also makes the point that accommodation of Muslim minorities in other countries has proved beneficial in increasing internal state support and relations.

Harris, Rachel. 2005. “Reggae on the Silk Road: The Globalization of Uyghur Pop.” *China Quarterly* (183): 627-643.

Annotation: In this article, the author contends that the Uyghurs’ pop music genre has had great impact in the socio-political arena in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China. She argues that Uyghur music has been successful in portraying the discontentment of the people over what they feel has been a loss of their homeland and culture. The author also points out the influences of international forms of music on Uyghur pop music, such as Reggae, the flamenco guitar styling of the Gypsy Kings, and Madonna. The author breaks down musical styles (i.e. strum patterns, lyrical metaphors, etc.) to demonstrate the different influences and political messages the music incorporates and the relevance it has to the Uyghur people.

Hierman, Brent. 2007. “The Pacification of Xinjiang: Uighur Protest and the Chinese State, 1988-2002.” *Problems of Post-Communism* 54 (3): 48-62.

Annotation: In this article, the author describes the state of Uyghur opposition to Chinese rule from the mid-twentieth to the beginning of the twenty-first century. The author contends that, although the “waves” of opposition and violent crackdowns from the government are becoming less common—indicative of the government’s successful “strike hard” military campaign against separatists—they are still a factor to be scrutinized because of the ambiguity of their effectiveness in the long term. The author suggests that violent repression of social unrest in the Xinjiang Region will only foster resentment against the Chinese government, whereas acceptance of cultural and religious identity and diversity will result in greater pacification and popular support from the more radical elements of the Uyghur population.

Hilpold, Peter. 2009. “The Kosovo Case and International Law: Looking for Applicable Theories.” *Chinese Journal of International Law* 8 (1): 47-61.

Annotation: This article describes the legal circumstances surrounding Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and its legitimacy as a country in relation to international law. The article contends that, if a country can unilaterally declare independence as long as there is an acceptance among the community of states, there will be upheaval of world order, which will present an onslaught of new problems for the international community. In Kosovo's case, the United Nations Security Council asked the International Court of Justice to review the legality of Kosovo's independence at the request of Serbia. The case is yet to be settled, but the results of the Court's findings are highly anticipated to set precedents in similar matters.

Hoh, Erling. 2005. "Interview with Sultan Kurash." *New Internationalist* 383 (October 1): 33.

Annotation: In this interview, popular Uyghur singer Sultan Kurash speaks of the Chinese government's disapproval of the nationalist themes of his songs and his calls for independence. The Chinese government has essentially banned his music and made it a crime to possess it. He speaks of how he has inspired Uyghurs to demand independence from Chinese rule.

Hyer, Eric. 2006. "China's policy towards Uighur Nationalism." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26 (1): 75-86.

Annotation: This article explains the Uyghurs' desire for an autonomous state in Western China, examining their grievances and China's reasons for not granting them independence. The Chinese government views the Uyghurs as a separatist group, which is contrary to their national belief of assimilation, and therefore it dissuades neighboring countries, such as Russia and India, from supporting the Uyghurs. The Uyghurs, in turn, believe in their right to self-determination as legal and just. This article looks at the external, as well as internal, factors of this conflict, giving a broader context in which to view the problem.

Reny, Marie-Eve. 2009. "The Political Salience of Language and Religion: Patterns of Ethnic Mobilization among Uyghurs in Xinjiang and Sikhs in Punjab." *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 32 (3): 490-521.

Annotation: The author of this article contends that language has historically been less divisive than religion when used as a rallying tool for government opposition from a minority group within a greater nation-state. The author highlights this occurrence by examining the cases of the Uyghurs in China and the Sikhs in India. The author believes that language rights are more likely than religious freedoms to be accommodated by governments, and that issues of religious freedom are therefore more often at the center of ethnic minority grievances.

Robins, Philip. 1993. "The Overlord State: Turkish Policy and the Kurdish Issue." *International Affairs*, Royal Institute of International Affairs 69 (4): 657-676.

Annotation: This article delves into the topic of Turkish domination of the Kurdish region, located in the border region it shares with Iraq. This article contends that the NATO countries should not blindly support Turkey when it comes to this issue just because Turkey presents itself as an ally in this unstable region. The author argues that long-term prosperity and peace between all of the involved parties requires a more in-depth analysis of the situation and the multi-faceted dimensions surrounding relations in the region.

Shichor, Yitzhak. 2009. "Ethno-Diplomacy: The Uyghur Hitch in Sino-Turkish Relations." *Policy Studies Series*, East-West Center (53): 1-53. Available online: <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/ps053.pdf>.

Annotation: This article reviews the history of Turkish and Chinese relations surrounding the issue of East Turkmenistan independence through ethno-diplomacy. Turkey has historically supported the Uyghur people and their goal of sovereignty. That support, however, has dwindled in the last few decades as China has increased its presence in Turkey through commerce and political influence. Turkish politicians now face a tough dilemma, as they feel pressure from both China to quell the powerful opposition movement in Ankara, and from their constituents, who openly support the Uyghurs with whom they share a cultural and historical connection.

———. 2005. "Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang." *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32 (2): 119-135.

Annotation: The author describes the issues of Islamism and external pressures that are exacerbating the Uyghur separatist movement in the Xinjiang province in Western China. This paper contends that increased use of media and loosening of travel restrictions has added to this problem. The author reports on the situation using the context of historic grievances that inspire separatist sentiments in the region.

Smith, Joanne N. 2002. "Making Culture Matter?: Symbolic, Spatial and Social Boundaries between Uyghurs and Han Chinese." *Asian Ethnicity* 3 (2): 153-174.

Annotation: This article describes how the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region of Western China create differences between themselves and the Han Chinese living in the area in order to maintain a level of distinction between them. The author uses the example the Uyghurs not consuming pork products in order to retain differences between themselves and the Han. This situation is exacerbated by growing anti-Han sentiment among the Uyghurs due to their lower socio-economic standing in relation to the Han.

United Nations. 2007. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Annotation: The United Nations General Assembly released the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007. This document established certain human rights for people who are of a nationality different than those of the predominating culture within a given state. These rights include: self-determination; freedom of religion; economic, social, and cultural determination; and freedom from persecution, racism, forced assimilation, political oppression, and social exclusion. The declaration also includes the right to territories and the right to access resources within ancestral lands. This document is intended to reflect the rights of indigenous people under international law and emphasizes the responsibility of the United Nations to uphold these laws.