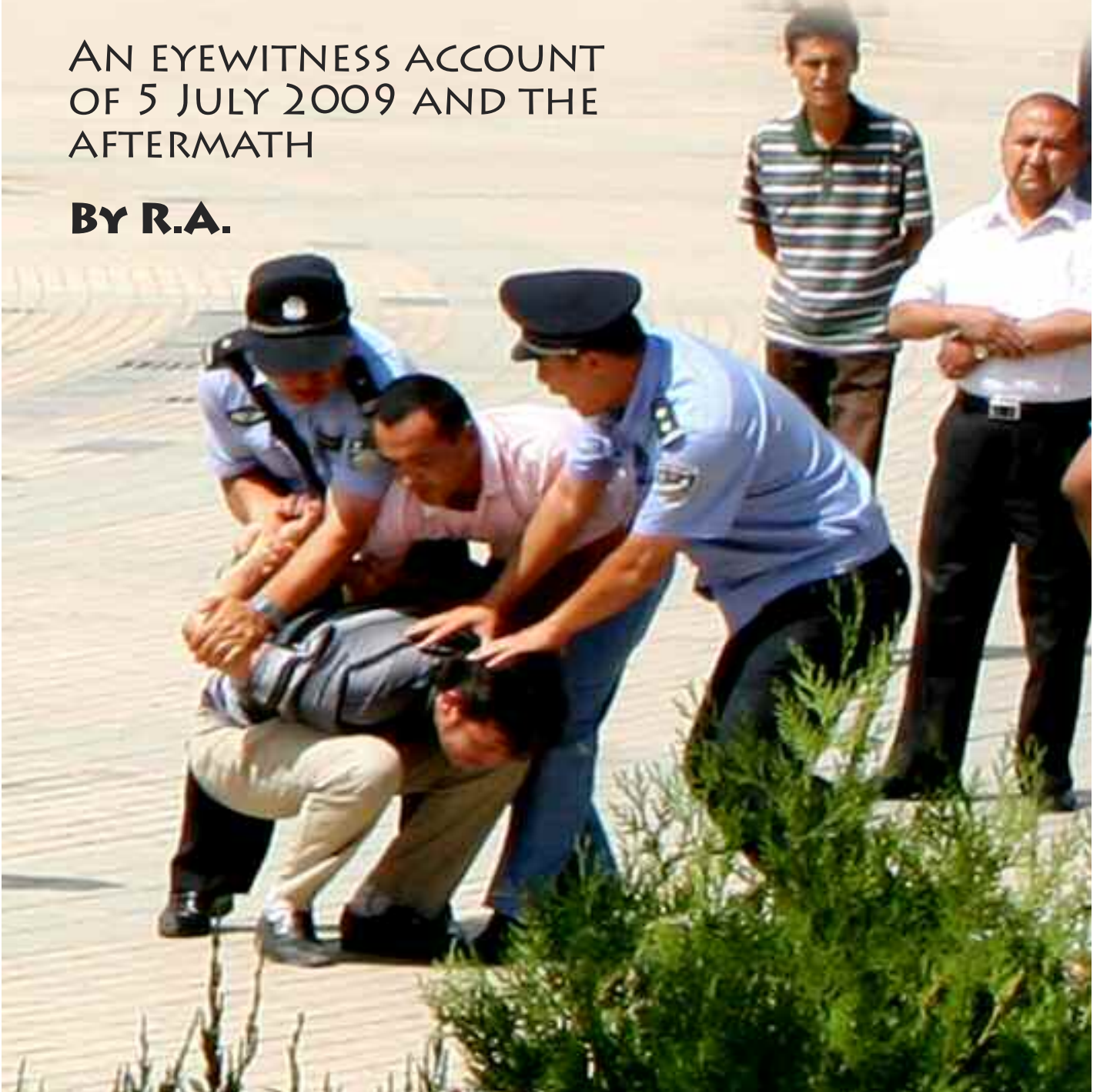


REFLECTIONS ON CHINESE POLICY IN XINJIANG - UIGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT
OF 5 JULY 2009 AND THE
AFTERMATH

BY R.A.



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FOREWORD

This essay comes from an eyewitness to events in Kashgar, Xinjiang of the so-called riots and Chinese authority's crackdown on protests on 5 July 2009.

Those events are an indelible stain on China's recent record of community relations and human rights. As the country celebrates 90 years of the founding of the Communist Party, China's leadership must urgently re-evaluate its progress towards an egalitarian state that respects its various cultures and beliefs and provides security and prosperity for all. Placed as the emerging world power, China can be an example of how an anti-imperialist narrative can be realised as a transformative alternative to a bankrupted liberal nation state.

Currently, China has a long way to go in dealing with the type of issues highlighted in this account. As the deprived and marginalised communities of the world battle all forms of colonialism, China needs to practice the anti-imperialism it has preached within its borders. There is an opportunity here for a new and better world to be accelerated. We pray China takes the opportunity to help found it.

Islamic Human Rights Commission, July 2011

BACKGROUND

The beginning of the peaceful protest of a few hundred Uighur students marching towards People Square in the heart of Urumqi- the capital of Xinjiang province in China - revealed nothing about what might have happened nor what was about to follow in the evening hours and the following days. Holding Chinese flags Uighur students left Xinjiang university to protest their outrage for what has become later widely known as the Shaoguan incident, a civil disturbance that took place overnight two weeks earlier on 25 June in Guangzhou province, China's manufacturing hub.



**Photograph 1:
Documented on a
bystander's cell phone -
Uighurs holding
Communist flags**

Two weeks had elapsed between the incident in Guangzhou until 5 July, and there was no sign or indication that social unrest- the biggest since Tiananmen Square and Beijing in 1989- was underway.

The sun was already low and the air was oppressively hot when I arrived at Urumqi's long distance train station on 27 June 2009. Business was as usual; multicoloured silk dressed women wearing headscarves strolling around, streets markets giving way to the grey skyline, dusted streets and houses shadowed (obscured) by construction sites indicating that in Urumqi the break with the past and the move towards "modernity" has began a long time ago.

Uighurs and Hans but also minorities such as Kazaks, Tungans and Kyrgyz have lived together in Urumqi as they have done for at least 50 years. Urumqi's history can be realized on its people's faces; dark, fair and white faces. And sometimes blue eyes with blond hair; a mosaic of different ethnic groups, races and cultures geographically located in the crossroad of the old Silk road on which Asia and Europe balanced.

For the most part Hans and Uighur have coexisted in segregation distributed in a clear pattern throughout Urumqi on a south to north axis. However, in the region of Xinjiang extreme violence has erupted at a number of occasions with sporadic bombings, uprisings and clashes between civilians and armed forces and less often between Uighur and Han ethnic groups.

Once across the streets of Urumqi one can't avoid noticing that the city consists of many different ways of living. For the Chinese Han emerging lower middle class - immigrated from the East of China to Xinjiang a generation or two ago - this is an age of aspiration where opportunities have multiplied but so did disappointments. A three year old car looks older than the neighbour's brand new car. A mobile phone without a few million mega-pixel camera integrated is dated.



Photograph 2: Chinese Han quarter of Urumqi

Expectations and hopes for them and their children are high but everything costs money. As a Han in Urumqi puts it, "Life will not always be like this. Right now it's the hardest time for us. Our children will grow up with more choice, they will not face so much the pressure and the competition"



Photograph 3

For most Uighurs this is a passing phase where their culture is fading towards obscurity.

Once occupying what was meant to be the centre of the world they're now conquered by fear and anxiety not to be left out as hordes of Chinese Hans start up businesses benefiting from the government's "Move West" policy.



Photograph 4



Photograph 5

Young Uighur men on the lookout for tourists ran up and locked elbows with the few tourists plunging and tumbling into the streets of the Da Bazaar (Big Market) offering any service from black market money changing to cheap accommodation, train tickets etc. A huddle of children and Uighur beggars followed whom they approached with their hands outstretched asking for help.

I hesitated for a while before a Uighur man-born and raised in Urumqi- accompanied me through the market. He spoke in fluent English with an American accent, "Sir, these Uighur people in the market's are *bindiks* (cheaters). They come from the countryside and can't find a job in Urumqi so they engage into other activities to earn a living. You better buy what you need and then move away to avoid problems..."



Photograph 6

Despite the seeming calm in the next few days, dark clouds gathered over Xinjiang suggesting that something had gone wrong when coffins with dead Uighur migrant workers were sent from Guangzhou back home to the sleepy city of Zhanmin which is situated half an hour drive from Kashgar. Zhanmin is a small city of about 20,000 inhabitants where like most Uighur towns - in the southwest province far from the touristic track of the Silk Road and without any industry to boost the local economy except small scale farming- there is not much happening. Uighurs here hardly speak basic Mandarin as most of them come hardly into contact with Chinese Han. Living standards are low, unemployment is rocket high, life slow and not many real options for young Uighurs who want to enter the labour force but to migrate for education purposes or in search for work.

In order to prevent the serious threat of the too-rapid urbanization of the eastern provinces and to control the massive internal migration from the villages and small towns to the big cities the Chinese government have imposed since the 1950s a series of measures and legislation to prevent

unauthorized immigration. The so called house registration system excludes migrants from registering to a distant commune whilst public and government services including health, social benefits, pensions, free education and housing keep people tied to their place of residence and occupation.

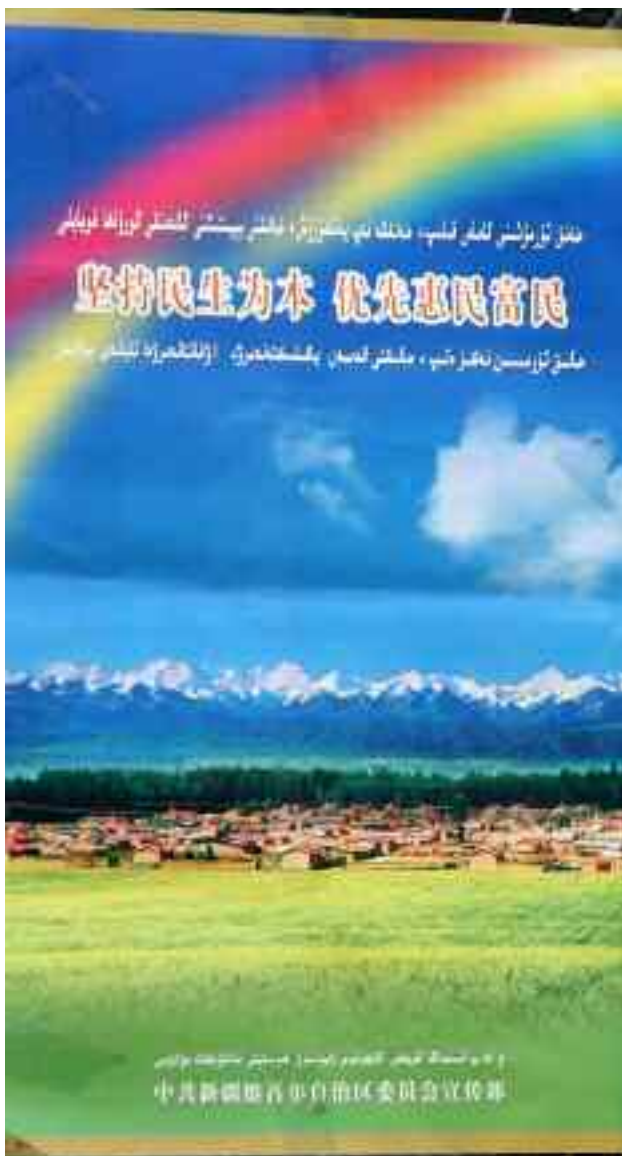
Although most of the public sector jobs and the vast majority of skilled and unskilled jobs are only available to permanent residents free migration is still possible but any unauthorized immigrant can only find work in construction, restaurants or as housekeepers.

This temporary mobility to the East coast though not encouraged was tolerated by the government as it was seen as rather beneficial because it simultaneously adsorbed the surplus of rural labour and improved the local economies as most of the rural migrants would send money back home to support their families.

Nevertheless, excluded by the house registration system and denied public social services offered only to permanent residents, migrant workers often endured abusive conditions, to summarize a few, such as; non-existent contracts, wage exploitation, physical violence and unfair treatment, deadly accidents, absence of medical and accident insurance, low standard on-site housing and discrimination by employers.

Moreover, because of their temporary status official legislation fails to effectively address and take action against these violations posing thus a potentially serious threat to public order and social stability.

The new Chinese government formed in 2003 has placed more emphasis on migrant's rights and rural development in China. It considers rural migration and urbanization as the most feasible solutions to the problems of underdevelopment in rural areas and the demand for labour in the cities. In order to satisfy the growing demand for labour in the industrial cities in and around the big cities but also to effectively eliminate such injustices the Chinese government has begun to make the necessary policy adjustments. One of the policies towards closing the gulf in incomes between the rich East and poor provinces was to promote a temporary, controlled in-migration of workers across the country depending on labour demands in different regions. Government recruiting agencies implement the national program to relocate thousands of peasants and poor people from the countryside to the coastal provinces for a period of time usually varying from a few months to a few years and then sent back to their homeland. The Government campaign would ensure quality and good terms and stability for the workers.



Photograph 7: “Maintain basic needs for people. Prioritizing and Benefiting the poor local people to get rich” Government’s propaganda campaign in Xinjiang promoting migration for work.

Due to the increased labour shortages in Guangzhou and because of the increased unemployment in Xinjiang and specifically in Kashgar prefecture and surrounding towns such as Zhanmin, the government initiated a controversial plan to relocate tens of thousands of unemployed Uighur workers to Guangzhou province to work on its factories. According to Xinjiang daily¹ most of the workers signed up for employment voluntarily but reports from Kashgar claim that workers who refused are being threatened with big fines.

RAPE RUMOURS

In May 2009 the first Uighurs arrived to Guangzhou to work for Xuri (Early Light) toy factory owned by the Early Light International Holdings one of the largest toy manufacturers in the world. A few more hundreds followed in the next weeks with Uighurs now

numbering almost a thousand. Most of them having never left the Kashgar prefecture found it difficult to adopt to the Chinese Han dominant culture in Guangzhou. The huge religious, cultural and geographical divide between the two ethnic groups as well as the deep rooted old suspicions and prejudices passed down from generation to generation kept well separated the newcomer Uighurs and Chinese Han migrants already in place.

A Han migrant worker stated, "At first, we thought they (Uighurs) were fun because in the evenings they danced and it was very lively," said the female worker who gave her name as Ma. "But then many others arrived. The more of them here the worst the relations became².

On June 23 an anonymous posting on the Internet in a Chinese social networking website claimed that Uighur men from Xuri Toy factory in Guangzhou raped two Han women. Suspicion and chatter start to circulate in the toy factory among Han workers about the newcomers from Kashgar. Hours later Han workers traded rumours about a second rape incident and unconfirmed allegations that although a Uighur man was arrested by the police he was later released whilst the toy factory management failed to take any action.

Two days later in the very early morning hours the rumours boiled over into a bloodbath as initially only a few Han workers with the help of outside gangs responded to a call by a Han woman who felt threatened by Uighur workers. Security guards tried to intervene but the standoff quickly escalated as agitated Han start smashing windows calling for reinforcements. The brawl quickly drew in hundreds of Han workers armed with sticks, knives and metal pipes storming the dormitories and beating to death unaware Uighurs in what has described as a one sided attack. By the time police arrived- 4 hours later -calm had been restored. As a result of the fighting 2 Uighurs died and more than a hundred were left seriously injured but unconfirmed reports by both Han and Uighur workers suggest that the killings have been understated by authorities in a desperate attempt to reduce tension.

A few days later, Huang Cuilian, the Han girl who felt intimidated by the Uighur workers described the incident to the state media as a “misunderstanding”.

"I was lost and entered the wrong dormitory and screamed when I saw those Uighur young men in the room, I just felt they were unfriendly so I turned and ran."

Xinhua reported that Guangdong authorities had arrested two people- suspected of having spread rumours online regarding the alleged sexual assault of Han women in Xuri factory- a bitter ex-employee of the factory and a laid off worker recently turned down for a job.

Another worker observes, “We didn’t like them and they didn’t like us but we both tolerated each other because we both came here to work, to earn a living.”

Disaffection and negative interethnic relations were not to be observed solely between Uighurs and Chinese Hans workers in Guangzhou- perhaps these were more prominent because of the long last hostility and diversity between the two ethnic groups- but also among workers who showed disaffection with their employers and official authorities.

This is due to the fact that since 2008 China’s industry start sliding into the dark clouds of recession as the economic crisis that hit most of the Western World drastically reduced the demand for factory produced products in China. Following 5 years of double digit annual growth 2008 and early 2009 have been a period of sharp decline for the Chinese economy and the rising expectations of the hundreds of millions of workers who anticipated prosperity were suddenly confronted by despair.

Guangzhou, China’s manufacturing powerhouse and biggest port, strategically situated in the Pearl of Delta handling millions of tons of cargo filled with products cheaply manufactured by millions of underpaid migrant workers working in tens of thousands of factories, was in the centre of this economic turmoil. Thousands of factories closed down leaving thousands of desperate workers with no other option but to go home.

“What are we supposed to do now?” said a worker of a toy factory that closed down recently. “Just pack and go home? We feel abandoned not only by our employers but also by the state. Someone went up on the roof and the police said just go ahead! We haven’t eaten for two days and we have no place to sleep. If a factory closes down there is nothing else you can do but keep turning up for work.”



Photograph 8: A Chinese worker is sleeping exhausted by forced overtime and poor working conditions on a bulldozer. Investigations into the conditions of Chinese workers have revealed deaths from exhaustion, and complaints of appalling pay; the shocking human cost of producing cheap products to meet demand by the Western world.

The riot in the Xuri toy factory was not an isolated incident. Rather it was one of the tens of thousands of “mass incidents” and outbursts of violence and discontent erupting from a mixture of economic uncertainty, the government’s inability to care for laid off workers, police brutality and the resulting rumours, paranoia and anxiety among workers not be left out by the spectacular economic boom that China is experiencing since embracing capitalism. With all legal channels closed down and self-organization into workers’ unions outlawed frustration and anger is growing but also racism, crime, abuse and other expressions of hopelessness.



Photograph 9: Two under age Chinese workers going to work in the early morning hours.

In 2009 thousands of “mass incidents” of unrest were recorded in Guangdong province, most of them too local ever to be reported in the national media. Chinese migrant workers on the edge of revolt- jobless, landless and growing increasingly desperate³. In one instance another laid off toy factory worker in Guangdong province on the verge of paranoia blew himself up in a government office. Many have committed suicide; a taxi driver burned his taxi, angry laid off workers in the Kai Da factory in Dongguan; overturned police vans and burned motorcycles before clashing with police after the company refused to renew expired contracts.

A witness said: "It happened so quickly ... There were maybe 500 involved and another 1,000 watching them. People were yelling: 'It's good to smash',⁴"

A Uighur worker in another factory noted, " We were not welcomed here by the Han. They felt we are taking up their jobs."

In February 2009, Beijing announced that over one in seven i.e. 20 million migrant workers could not find work or had been laid off. In March, updated figures estimated that 14 million rural migrants had remained home after the Lunar New Year, while 11 million who had returned to the city were still unable to find work⁵.

Although Guangdong authorities claim they found no evidence of rape, many Han workers confirmed they have heard the rumours in Shaoguan triggering the racial attacks by Chinese Han against Uighur workers in Xuri factory. It seems that Hans felt threatened when the 'foreign-looking' Uighurs were re-located in Guangdong. Thousands of Uighurs being recruited whilst Han being laid off in the midst of recession could have sparked the fire. Was it that the fading dream of the Han working class of attaining wealth and the high expectations raised by China's recent development became disappointment and paranoia to be left out by the economic boom that eventually escalated to rumour spreading? True or fabricated rumours? The debate remains open.

What the Shaoguan incident did was to shed light on the human rights violations against the rural workers (both Uighur and Han) who were relocated from thousands of miles away to work in poor conditions and with no safety net, independent workers union rights or an official body to protect them when the recession broke out. The thousands of protests and the irrational reaction by many workers in Guangdong during 2008 and the first half of 2009 confirm this general sentiment that something has gone wrong. The ethnic segregation between Uighur and Han ethnic groups did not start with the Shaoguan incident but goes back many centuries ago since both ethnic groups laid claims on Xinjiang. The riots in Urumqi would have happened either way, sooner or later, the Shaoguan incident did nothing more but speed up the process.

ZANMIN SHUT

The Chinese authorities and the media's immediate response was to underreport the Shaoguan incident fearing the riots in Shaoguan will spread over Xinjiang province if the death of the Uighurs becomes widely known.

The two dead bodies were sent back to Zanmin and the family was promised a compensation for the death of the workers. Unofficial reports from Kashgar prefecture claim that the government was particularly concerned about the Uighurs reaction, thus police, armed forces and paramilitary groups were all mobilized to ensure very tight control and surveillance of local Uighurs. In Zamin, streets signs weren't put in the entrance of the city reading:

- Solidify ethnic unity, fight against ethnic separation activities.
- Promote education on ethnic unity, construct harmonious society.
- As long as all ethnic groups unite, no body can defeat us!
- Individual pilgrimage (to Mecca) is violating the law, and is prohibited by the law.
- Ethnic splitting activities won't win the hearts of the people!
- Promote education, and protect the people's freedom in religious belief!



Photograph 10:
Unemployed workers
and beggars in
search of recyclable
materials and
leftovers after a
demolition

In order to reduce the tension in Shaoguan, Uighurs from the Xuri factory were transferred to another location to temporary accommodation whilst armed guards blocked the entrance and exit. The authorities were weeks late to acknowledge the incident and to arrest the Han responsible. Moreover authorities refrained from providing crucial

information about the attacks and police's late intervention. Most importantly, authorities failed to step in and communicate the incident effectively and re-assure both media and the public as well as the international community that an immediate full investigation and a fair trial is underway that will shed more light on the incident and the people responsible will be punished.

Instead, 10 days later the details were still sketchy whilst so far only a few Uighurs in Xinjiang were aware of the incident. Yet photographs and videos of the brutality from mobile phone coverage quickly circulated on the Internet along with anonymous reports by Chinese Han workers and Uighurs that the death toll was underreported. Uighur exile groups and students were the first to acknowledge the incident and with the help of modern technology they sent emails and mobile phone messages to mobilize Uighurs in Xinjiang and to call for protests.

URUMQI 5 JULY

The demonstration initially began on 5 July where a peaceful crowd of about 1000 students, many of whom were holding Chinese flags, marched down from Xinjiang University and the Big Bazaar all the way to People's Square demanding a full investigation of the Shaoguan incident.

Once there, the protesters were confronted by police and army forces who blocked their way and used excessive forces to disperse the crowd. Many got arrested and others were injured during the confrontation. The rest retreated to the Bazaar where they informed Uighur sellers and passersby about the Shaoguan incident. The small crowd turned into an angry mob that took security forces by surprise. Uighurs moved a few streets away from the Bazaar in the borderline where the Uighur district meets the Han.

In South Jiefang road, North Xinhua road and the side streets around the hospital Uighurs armed with knives, sticks, batons and rocks broke into shops, burned cars and attacked Han citizens passing by.



Photograph 11

Armed vehicles and police officers were dispatched and tried to disperse the rioters by setting up roadblocks but rioters smashed and overturned police cars and then set them on fire. Violence escalated in the South Jiefang road where Uighurs moved into the small alleyways and side streets launching more assaults. A Han who survived the attacks stated:

“They didn't want to talk or to discuss they just start hitting me because they realized I was Han. I had to run for my life”

Police reinforcements were sent to the area and- according to witnesses- shot dead many rioters. By the time night fell the only sounds one could hear were of machine guns in full operation. A French tourist trapped between the confrontations stated that:

“Police forced us up to the roof terrace in a building in Da Bazaar. From there we could hear machine gun shots and police cars driving quickly. An armed officer confiscated the camera of a tourist who took a photograph.”

Access to Da Bazaar was restricted and police eventually took control of the situation. A curfew was imposed and small army units strolled the streets arresting anyone walking the streets.

According to state Media (Xinhua) and other government official sources the clashes left 197 people dead and 1721 people injured whilst hundreds of cars and businesses were burned to ashes. These official sources claim that the vast majority of the dead are of Chinese Han origin and their bodies have been retrieved from the street lanes and then taken to hospitals. Police have published photographs of dead bodies lying on the street but there is no clear evidence of their ethnic origin as most of the bodies are turned upside down facing the ground or their facial features have been severely damaged or decomposed beyond recognition.

According to unofficial sources and Uighur exile groups the death toll is much higher as many Uighurs were killed as well. A Uighur student in Xinjiang university claimed that:

“I returned to the campus just after midnight. Police and army paramilitary groups surrounded Xinjiang University with trucks, police vans and other vehicles. For most of the night you could only hear the sound of the gunfire breaking the silence. In the early morning the road outside the university and the nearby side streets were full of fresh blood.”

Late at night witnesses confirmed that electricity in Dawen- a predominantly Uighur residential area situated on the south of Da Bazaar- in the south of Urumqi was centrally switched off and a police clean-up operation took place in complete darkness.

Surrounded Uighurs were rounded up and forced into police vans whilst again many locals have confirmed hearing gunshots.

In stark contrast to the way state Media and officials dealt with the Shaoguan incident the Urumqi 5 July riots have been extensively over-reported. From the first hours the riots broke out until weeks afterwards images of Uighurs rioting and Chinese Han being assaulted circulated in the local news. Most of the graphic footage broadcasted by the Media closely followed the government line to focus on injured Han, and dead bodies whilst footage of Uighurs being shot dead or arrested during police operations had been banned. During my return to Urumqi from Kashgar I noticed that it was the same 3-4 minutes footage repeated over and over again for the next few weeks.

Nur Bekri, Xinjiang's Uighur chairman and member of the communist Party, stated in regular TV appearances that the local authorities of both Xinjiang and Guangdong have responded with respect to the dead and denounced the Urumqi protest and the following unrest as: "pre-planned by Uighur exile groups to ignite violence". The Xinjiang Regional People's Congress further blamed the 5 July unrest on "separatism, religious extremism and terrorism" fomented from abroad directly blaming as the main instigator the president of Uighur World Congress and prominent exile Uighur leader Rabiya Kadeer.



Photograph 12: Chinese soldiers singing the national Anthem of China.



Photograph 13: During curfew the only vehicles to be seen are the ones of the security forces parading. The banner reads as “Support action for Justice”.



Photograph 14: The Chinese army parade the streets in an attempt to show the World its force



Photograph 15: Chinese Han citizens cheer the army and soldiers parading the streets of Urumqi. A sordid combination of repression and radical ethnic nationalism.

The days following the unrest were dominated by official propaganda broadcasts by China Central Television (CCTV) and Xinhua news agency but also by police and army vehicles that drove up and down as if during a national day parade broadcasting messages and the national anthem through roof mounted loud speakers. This was an obvious attempt to fool public opinion about the real motives behind the Urumqi protests and boost Chinese national identity to unite against alleged foreign interference and outsiders seeking to pose a serious threat to Xinjiang's social harmony.

This national propaganda aimed at enhancing nationalism and boosting the morale of Han Chinese against the "outside threat" inflamed an anti-Uighur sentiment among Chinese Han in Urumqi in the days following the unrest. Indeed, demonizing all Uighurs comes somewhat of a surprise as there were only a few hundred Uighurs rioting and a few more protesting whilst there are hundreds of thousands of Uighurs in Urumqi many of whom denounced the attacks, helped the injured Han or at the very least did not participate at all to the unrest but remained locked in their houses.

Both the one sided report on the incidents and the deliberate non reporting of the underlying reasons of the Uighur protests as well as failing to acknowledge the brutal crackdown of an otherwise peaceful protest (at its beginning) and the fact that many Uighurs were among the dead, injured and arrested both in Guangzou and Urumqi did nothing more than pour oil onto the fire.

The Chinese government's response was to seize the opportunity given by the attacks to divert from the real issues- being the increasingly growing popular discontent about the government's treatment of the unprivileged and ethnic minorities that triggered both the Shaoguan and Urumqi incidents- led ultimately to the criminalization of the Xinjiang Uighurs. Indeed, most Chinese Han in Urumqi I spoke to were unaware of the Shaoguan incident and blamed Uighurs for being spies, extremists and religious fanatics seeking to separate Xinjiang from China. Whilst walking the streets of Da Bazaar a few Chinese Han approached me and urged me to leave as soon as possible because:

"This area is unsafe for you. You should come to eat here but then go immediately as Uighurs are killers, you know religious extremists."

A few seconds later Uighurs who had overhead, engaged in a small scale brawl with the Han for denouncing them only to be interrupted violently by undercover officers arresting one of the Uighurs.

Willingly or not, Chinese official response to the incidents led to the escalation of the unrest in the following days. Han Chinese interpreted the call for unification against the "foreign threat" as a call against the "Uighur threat" driven by the popular suspicion that Uighurs are foreigners in Xinjiang, second class citizens and outsiders who have been receiving support and funding by Uighur-American exiles and Europeans to create chaos. Calling to unite was then seen as a call to defend themselves as if the hundreds of thousands of Chinese armed forces couldn't defend the region.

In defiance of the imposed curfew fresh chaos erupted in Urumqi as thousands of angry Han mobs gathered in the days following the riots amid a welter of rumours of more killings (unconfirmed) and the fear of this imaginary foreign threat.

Armed with knives, clubs, baseball bats, bars, machettes and wooden stakes Chinese Han mobs marched up and down Jiefang Road- heading to Da Bazaar- chanting the Chinese national anthem. Some groups raced the streets in cars and vans seeking Uighurs, others paroled the neighborhoods, many waited outside Uighur houses and businesses. In contrast to the demographics of the Uighur mobs on 5 July- being mostly a few hundred unprivileged migrants in Urumqi- launching assaults, Chinese Han mobs were tens of thousands of all ages; from respected upper middle class citizens and employees to workers, men and women, children but also elder people, all together armed were seeking Uighurs. Furthermore, the Uighur unrest was more a hot blooded reaction when the peaceful demo of the students was brutally dispersed bringing the Shaoguan incident into the spotlight. In stark contrast Han Chinese marched the streets 2-3 days after the Uighur attacks having thus experienced the clampdown and tranquillity coming into place during curfew and the army presence. Many Uighurs I spoke to claimed the Communist guards in safeguarding every neighbourhood are also to be held responsible for the Han mob uprising by calling them to patrol the streets.

Was the formation of the mobs an official master plan to create further unrest? Perhaps so that Media correspondents and the public opinion will focus on the ethnic problem as opposed to concentrating on internal issues such as human rights violations, religious and class discrimination and repression in Xinjiang?

Chinese Han roamed the streets of Urumqi for at least 3 days burning down Uighur properties regardless if they were situated in Da Bazaar or not, attacked passers by, chanted Chinese songs and nationalistic slogans such as, “ I will defend my country”, “We demand security for ourselves”, “Attack Uighurs”.

A Uighur student in Xinjiang Univerisy claimed that Uighur students were all locked in the dormitories for days without food fearing Chinese students attacks in the yard.

“We were hiding from Han students whilst police and security guards standing a few metres away did nothing to protect us as if they would wish something bad will happen to us” Correspondents from Western Media and Xinhua who tried to cover the incidents were attacked by the mobs and held by police for safety reasons.

The thousands of heavily armed police officers did not do much to disperse the Han mobs besides occasionally firing tear gas and having military trucks with loudspeakers blaring: “Please cooperate and go home”. Tensions spiked dramatically as lone Uighurs were attacked by the crowds, Uighur businesses were looted and burned.

There were no Han arrested by the police and no information provided about injuries, deaths and destroyed businesses. On the other hand, the number of Uighurs arrested rose as police operations in Da Bazaar detained Uighur men at gunpoint. A Uighur woman wearing a colourful headscarf said police arrived in Da Bazaar Monday evening and arrested 300 men on suspicion of participating in the 5 July riots.

“My husband had nothing to do with the riot but police broke down our door and arrested him. Others were stripped naked and taken away. I don’t know what has happened to my husband and where he was taken to.”

A few hundred Uighur women marched the streets of Da Bazaar in a protest demanding their husbands be released by the police. They chanted “Release our men” only seconds later to be surrounded by armed forces along with water canon blocking both ends of the road.



Photograph 16: Han mobs destroyed Uighur businesses regardless of their location. The picture shows a destroyed Uighur business located miles away of Da Bazaar.



Photograph 17: A Uighur woman walks in front of a destroyed business in Da Bazaar

KASHGAR - 5 JULY 2009

I arrived in Kashgar in the early morning sun as the city awoke, like a watercolour slowly coming to life; sellers were trading silk, exotic fruits, livestock and jade in the city's bustling bazaars whilst the centuries old cultural sites and mud-brick neighbourhood, home to Kashgar's Uighurs- were being ruthlessly bulldozed to heaps of rubble and dirt.



Photograph 18: Demolition of the Old Town

In town I sat in a corner stall in the backside alleyways nearby Id Kah mosque waiting for a local Uighur friend who as always was arriving late. "Better late than never," I thought feeling a strange warmth to the air and a smell of freshness. YES! I smiled... and inhaled deeply the thick smoke- a mixture of the burning coal, spices and the fatty kebab arranged in order on a barbeque rack nearby.

From afar, I recognized Mohamed approaching. I waived but he did not acknowledge. He was advancing at a snail's speed as if he didn't want to be there.

"Hey," said Mohamed interrupting my thoughts and sat next to me whilst looking nervously to

different directions with a guilty glance, as if he was ready to confess something rather unpleasant.

“Giaksoumissis” I replied

“I am sorry but I will not be able to guide you around Kashgar, it is unsafe to be here.”



Photograph 19

Though young and dressed in modern clothes Mohamed is quite religious taking any chance to declare proudly he is a good Muslim. Like most Uighurs from Kashgar he prays 5 times a day, doesn't drink alcohol and fasts during Ramadan. Unemployed, he immigrated to Urumqi but seems to be unhappy far from Kashgar- his motherland as he often refers to it- because:

“Urumqi Uighurs are not like Uighurs from Kashgar, they have been Chinesized, they go to bars, drink alcohol, engage in fights do not pray, they don't even speak or write Uighur properly.”

In Urumqi, he lives in a close circle of Kashagriliks in a Uighur populated area without interacting with Chinese Han or Urumqi Uighurs. His family back in Kashgar has recently

moved out from their old house and the mudbrick neighbourhood he grew up in has been demolished; the old mosque, the small alleyways, the street bazaar the stalls and local Uighur restaurants selling *polo* and *lagman* and *Kaimak* ice cream are all gone. In their place shopping malls, roads, artificial lakes and Chinese restaurants along with thousands of new comer Han Chinese on the increase.

The seriousness of his voice instantaneously grasped my attention.

"What's wrong?" I asked with curiosity.

He responded, lowering his voice as if he was about to engage to any sort of conspiracy, "Because of the protests in Urumqi...Yesterday whilst we were out for dinner with my family we saw police arresting Uighurs randomly, even old men and women. This is not good... Not good at all! We are going to spend the next days in my grandparents house a few hours drive away until things return to normal. I am sorry but if I am seen with a foreigner I will be in big trouble."

He continued, "Tomorrow morning Uighurs will gather to Id Kah mosque to protest the unreasonable arrests of Uighurs in both Urumqi and Kashgar. The city will be under martial law and there might be unrest. Inshallah, I'll see you again soon."

"God bless you," Mohamed said and walked away.

Waking up the next morning, I heard on CCTV news in English that in Urumqi terrorists have struck killing many Han Chinese and that their leaders who are abroad have implemented this master plan to jeopardize social harmony and national unity ahead of the 60th anniversary of Communist rule (1 October, 2009). At the reception desk the Chinese Han owner of the Hotel tried to prevent me from leaving claiming that police orders were that tourists were to remain at Hotel premises but quickly he gave up.

I left the hotel and walked quickly through the town towards the direction of the central mosque-the meeting point for the protest. On my way, I noticed hordes of remaining tourists rushing to the stations to leave Kashgar by any means. Upon arriving, I came across police and army blocking every direction to and from the mosque to the old town.

I recalled Mohamed's words and wondered how can Kashgar have an edge of unrest, there is no living soul in the square but soldiers; indeed the town was covered in complete silence? I stood still staring at the mosque, it was prayer time, thinking how many people might be praying inside.

As if in answer to my queries, a few hundred Uighur men poured out from the main entrance and instantaneously stood still; puzzled by the vast number of Chinese armed forces already in place and increasing continuously. The Uighurs were massively outnumbered.

The details of the next moments very much resembled the first round of a wrestling match where the two opponents stand in complete stillness waiting out of fear or curiosity for one another to make the first move. The mismatch was that the unarmed Uighurs were outnumbered by the heavily armed Han forces. The next few seconds passed sadistically slow dragged by in what seemed like hours- the petrified eyes in anticipation of the first move, the young soldiers in a standby position, a young Uighur wearing a moustache tilting forward and then backwards, the desperate scream of his wife nearby, the coolness of the summer wind- were all suddenly interrupted by the sound of Uighur men pouring out from the bazaar. A second later the Uighurs joined and voices altogether to become one that echoes through the square and the adjoining mosque:

"Repression..."

"Repression..."

"Repression..."

"Repression..."

The sudden arrival seemed to catch government forces off guard who watched puzzled at the emerging crowd thronging outside the mosque.



Photograph 20

Mostly under age children but also headscarfed women and men of all ages cried out in celebration when more and more Uighurs arrived to express their discontent. They shouted and smiled feeling the danger of a brutal crackdown fleeing away as their numbers rose.



Photograph 21

Holding each others' hands Uighurs made a few steps forward. Their faces alarmed with both fear and joy for what seemed to be the early stage of a peaceful protest.

Han armed forces stood in ranks on the other side of the square. The sound of loudspeakers mounted on the top of the vehicles broadcasting messages of social harmony. The slogan, "Xinjiang has always been part of China and Uighurs one of China's 55 minority groups", did not reveal anything of what was about to happen a few moments later.

Undercover police officers had already penetrated the square whilst others were closing in dangerously from different directions eventually surrounding the main body of the protest. A threatening voice replaced the propaganda messages signalling the crackdown and the arrest of the protesters: "That do not obey Chinese law."

"Leave immediately or you will be shot. By remaining you will be severely punished and risk long term imprisonment."

The crackdown of a peaceful protest was already in progress. I ran into the background and removed the cap from my lens taking the first few shots of the spectacle unfolding in front of me.



Photograph 22: Some Uighurs ran, others stayed puzzled unable to comprehend the unreasonable attack



Photograph 23

People squeezed into corners, others found shelter in the mosque, restaurant owners locked the doors leaving out hundreds of terrified Uighurs running to avoid an unjustified arrest. Women held their heads and pulled their hair out in despair unable to intervene as their husbands or sons were being arrested.



Photograph 24



Photograph 25



Photograph 26: Two elder women scream in agony trying to prevent the arrest of their beloved one whilst police officers have ripped off his T-shirt



Photograph 27



Photograph 28: Even passers-by, families and Uighurs with small children were targeted by armed officers.



Photograph 29: Arrested Uighurs scream loud in great physical pain whilst soldiers start gathering in the square.



Photograph 30



Photograph 31

The remaining Uighurs did not react to the arrest and the brutal crackdown of a protest that never began. Although the hundreds of arrests and the Uighur retreat should have signalled the end of the clean-up operation hundreds of soldiers moved in as if the police and undercover forces were not able to finish off the job. It was about then when I saw through my lens a group of around three- hundred Chinese Han clearly breaking out from the army frontline and armed with baseball sticks running from one side of the square towards the remaining protesters who were either scattered around or standing silent, observing.

There was a big similarity among these Hans and the Han mobs in Urumqi. Many questions can be raised about the legitimacy of this force as it appeared more as a paramilitary group, a mob that has been recruited by officials to support the armed forces. This move, instead of easing the tension, pours more oil onto the fire as Uighurs view Chinese security forces and Han Chinese mobs as one united, threatening force. Positioning them to the frontline so they can launch attacks on Uighurs suggests that the security forces planned the crackdown regardless its peaceful or violent nature. Wearing jeans, T-shirts, trainers and holding baseball bats the mobs spread chaos to the square outside Id-Kah mosque launching assaults and challenging Uighurs.



Photograph 32



Photograph 33: Chinese Han mobs breaking out from the armed forces front lines.



Photograph 34

I took a few more photographs but during the last few frames, in my peripheral vision, I noticed the hand of a man extending and then blocking a great portion of my view. The Uighur man in his mid-forties spoke in a strong Uighur Kashgari accent “Giok.” No photo.

I didn’t acknowledge and moved a few metre to the side pressing the shutter a few more times.

The man closed in slowly and as if in a fierce dilemma looked at me for a few seconds and then pulled out from his wallet a police ID card.

I nodded my head to comply but later continued taking photographs.

Usually my photography encounters with police officers keep reinforcing my feelings of disgust about the police's bullying tactics, harassment, intimidation and brutal crackdown.

But in this case the man kept observing me but did not interfere again with my mission to record the incidents. There was something strange and melancholic in his eyes as if what he saw scared him so much his mind went into denial or as if he hadn’t fully consented to his role to contribute to the brutal crackdown of the protest.

He didn’t want to arrest me neither to allow me to take photographs of the brutal crackdown. He didn’t want to confiscate my camera or remove the memory card neither to force me to delete the few hundred fragments of a second I already recorded. I stood puzzled staring sometimes at him and then the action on the other side. Being a Uighur officer in Kashgar is no easy task for one must feel constantly his conflicting identities coming together.

Perhaps he is always engaged into a routine debate, balancing on a tight rope- on one side the Chinese armed forces ideology and duty whilst on the other the local Kashgari identity- must be a risky adventure, a perceptual uncertainty: Should he or should he not obey? Or should he join the protesters?

Dual identities create tensions. Disregarding even the most absurd order of one’s superiors when serving the armed forces in a Communist country such as China is suicidal and will most likely result to imprisonment, severe punishment or at the very least will signal the end of his career. Nevertheless, a Kashgar-Uighur identity is fuelling one's heart with empathy and understanding about the Uighur cause; having himself experienced discrimination, human rights abuse and repression. It is an ethical choice the Uighur police officer has to make- a difficult decision where the line between right or wrong appears blurry and the final decision relied upon a sketchy factual reasoning.

Why did he refuse to comply with the superior’s request? Was his mission to stay on the sidewalk to control bystanders and if so why did he not arrest me? Did he deliberately stay aside unwilling to play his role in the farce that was unfolding in front of our eyes?



Photograph 35: Arrested Uighurs have been taken away to detention centres



Photograph 36



Photograph 37



Photograph 38



Photograph 39

I had to stop taking photographs as armed soldiers moved towards my side and turned around following the crowd of Uighurs running away quickly towards the side-streets of the Bazaar. A Uighur boy I bumped into whilst running informed me that the loudspeaker messages translates as, “ Don’t take photos...Go home or you will be shot!”

I left, leaving behind many Uighurs arrested for doing nothing wrong. The number rose to a few hundred as police and army forces entered the sidewalks of the old town arresting passers-by randomly. Within minutes the city got deserted, curfew was imposed and communications including internet and mobile networks were shut down. Army tanks and soldiers paraded in the streets broadcasting messages of foreign “spies interfering in Chinese matters.”

I left 2 days later for Urumqi. The Uighur boy I met and with whom I passed the next few days in Kashgar got arrested seconds after I boarded the train. He argues he was transferred to a school that, “was turned into a detention centre. Walking through the school corridors under police escort I could hear sounds of beatings and screams of Uighurs in great physical pain. Police locked me in a room after removing all my clothes. I was kept naked for 7 hours listening to the voices of people being tortured. Then two police officers entered and questioned me in relation to the foreign photographer I was seen with.”

AFTERMATH OF JULY 2009 UNREST

In September 2009 following the events of 5 July the communist party announced its increased spending in public security in order to further maintain social stability in the province.

Despite the increase in public spending Beijing measures did not do much to change the strong resentment found among both Uighurs and Hans for each other, instead they suggest that the concept of terrorism has been applied in a biased fashion with Uighurs being subjected to intense scrutiny and discrimination.

The ‘strike hard and punish’ campaign was meant to root out places that criminals breed and sealing off the province from foreign and Uighur diasporas' influence. The draconian measures approved by Beijing – and implemented rapidly by the local government - focused on a three step approach: propaganda, both surveillance and clean up operations and demolition of Uighur areas in Urumqi where the violence broke out.

Almost immediately, as violence swept through Xinjiang the government unplugged internet access and international calls in Xinjiang whilst slowing down mobile services so that even receiving and making local calls was difficult. In the meantime, social networking sites were closed down in all parts of China as controlling content has become a major issue.

Withholding information from spreading overseas was seen as maintaining social order and at the same time avoiding Western criticism coming from the emerging images and videos

depicting the brutality against protesters during protest and the cleanup operations underway.

The Central propaganda department's control extended itself into every medium concerned with the dissemination of information; media and news organizations, educational establishments, museums, art and exhibition centres but also public spaces through the use of posters, written announcements and advertisements.

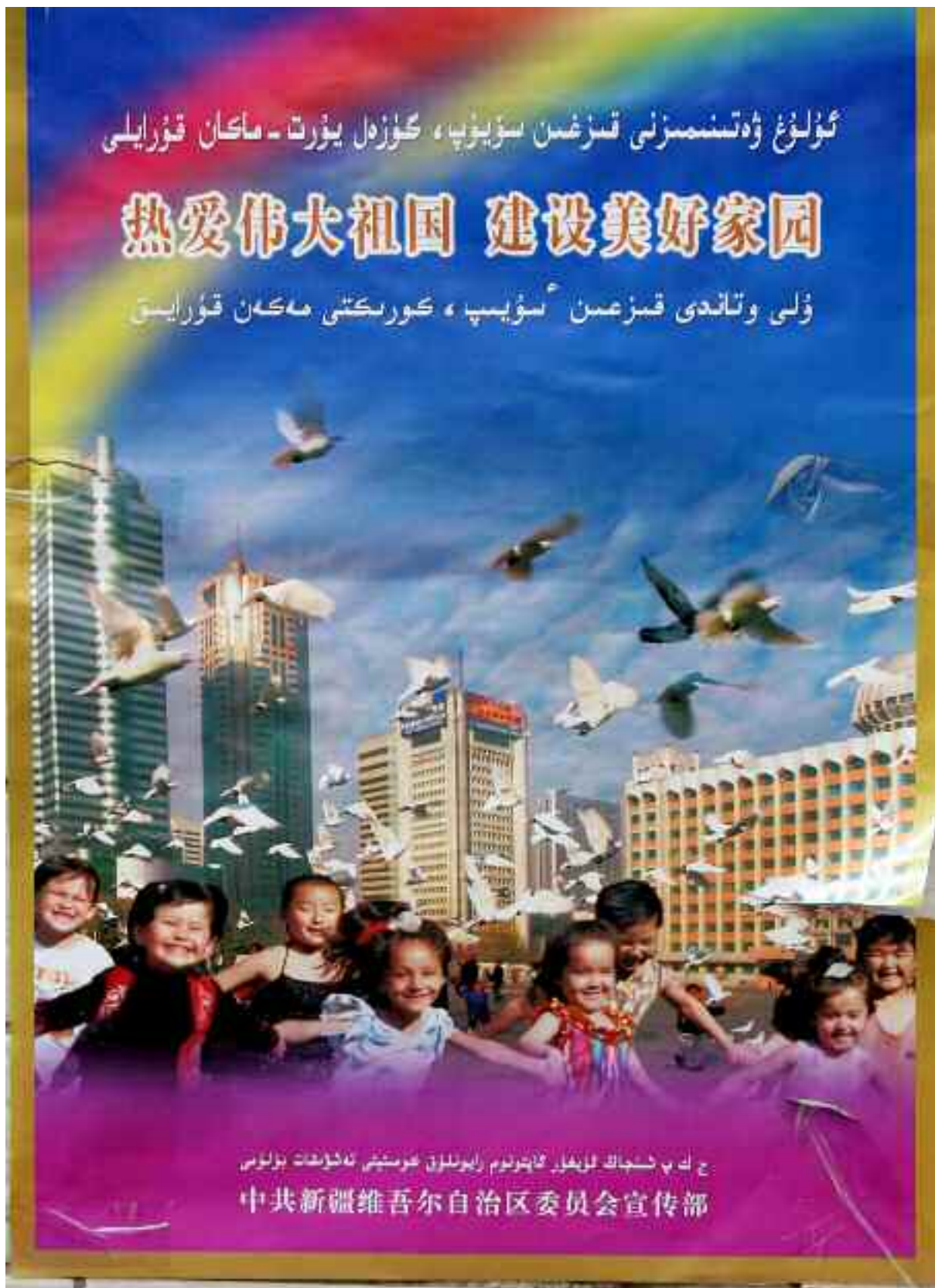
Internet was replaced by a controlled closed network available to citizens of Xinjiang with limited news, on-line films and music widely known as Xinjiang Internet. Through Xinjiang Internet but also in the Media and through official announcements an unprecedented propaganda campaign took place about foreigners interfering, terrorism and calls for social harmony and unification. Many Uighurs have been recorded– in numerous staged messages–proclaiming their positive sentiments towards the government and the increasing economic opportunities in the region. Uighurs from Guangzhou have been recorded happily claiming they are being treated very well by the locals and that Uighurs in Xinjiang “Shouldn't listen to foreign propaganda.”

Urkeshe, a Uighur high school student near Da Bazar told me that once schools reopened after the riots officials paid them regular visits during which mobile phones and other recording devices had been searched for illegal recordings. He argues, “They asked us to leave our mobile phones on our desks but I was quick to erase videos and photographs from 5 July.”

For the next 8 months Xinjiang citizens and foreigners had to travel 17 hours on a bus to the neighbouring province of Gansu in order to access the Internet. There, a black market was created with very few expensive hotels forcing visitors to pay sky-high rates.

Similarly in Xinjiang province a few state controlled companies, banks and security forces were given lines to access the normal Internet at work. Taking advantage of the situation, many offered an illegal service-to foreigner's only- of charging 10 Yuan per email sent on their behalf.

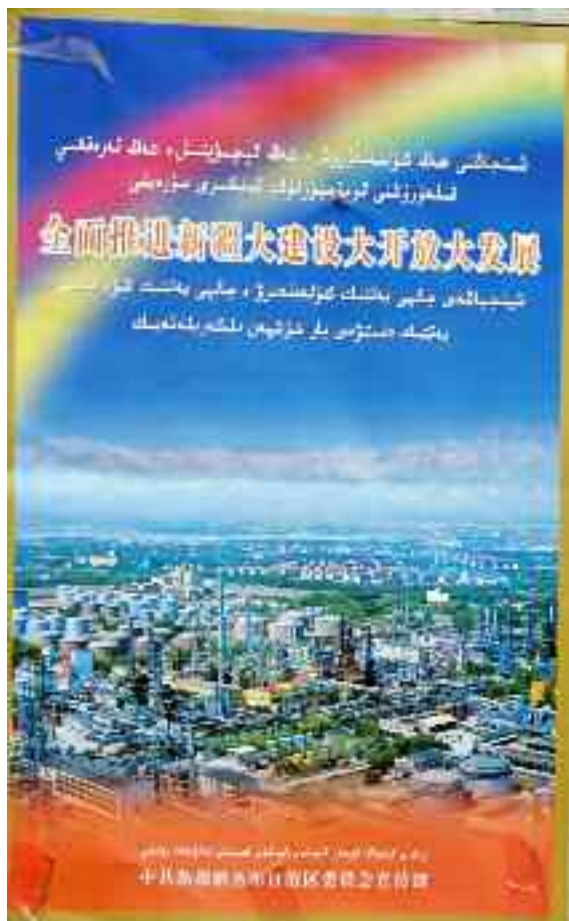
Within weeks thousands of bilingual posters were put onto walls in every Uighur neighbourhood some depicting China's effectiveness in transforming the country's other happy minorities dressed with the traditional costumes suggesting social harmony under the Communist party's rule.



Photograph 40: In this poster minority children mostly Uighur, Kazak and Mongol appear happy holding hands and playing in People's Square in Urumqi (where July protesters gathered to protest against repression). In both Uighur and Chinese it is written, "Love our great motherland. Build a beautiful homeland" (Communist Bureau of Xinjiang Propaganda.)



Photograph 41: Minorities dressed up with their traditional clothes in Urumqi with the Urumqi Skyline on the background. “Unification of all nations is a lifeline of all nationals in Xinjiang”(Propaganda Department-Communist Bureau of Urumqi-Bureau of Social Order)



Photograph 42: “Push forward on all fronts for great construction, great open policy and development in Xinjiang.”

In this turbulent time, Chinese officials confident after attaining their goals-that every conceivable medium which transmits and conveys information within Xinjiang (but also to and from China to the West) falls under bureaucratic purview of the Propaganda Department- put into force regional policies along less moderate lines; closure of Uighur Bazaars, attacks on Islam and assimilationist policies.

Within weeks after the riots thousands of forces, officials and police intelligence experts were brought to Urumqi to report on the 5 July incidents and investigate any Uighurs considered dangerous or having participated in the riots. They used campaign and framing strategies to publicly denounce Uighurs considered to be a threat asking Urumqi citizens to collaborate with police by providing information related to the riots.



Photograph 43: “All nationals united come together and fight for development and prosperity”. There are no Chinese Han represented just minorities.



Photograph 44



Photograph 45

The photo above was posted on walls and published in newspapers and printed publications asking people to call with information regarding 5 July. It states that usually newspapers don't sell out but since they include photographs of the July suspects they have been sold out in 2 hours not only in People's Square but also at all selling points in Urumqi. A Han citizen is quoted in the newspaper saying, "There is such a big demand that I can't buy the paper. Please enlarge it and put it everywhere. These people will become the mouse for everyone to run after to kill. Like the mouse crossing the street."

A police officer comments that, "110,000 yuan already given for information received. So far 474 calls received by anonymous callers confirming the involvement of 237 Uighur suspects, 1 of them involved in killing and injuring civilians, 221 involved in arson, destruction and robbery.

Police department will evaluate the information that callers provide and if good will reward well. Pictures of more suspects awaiting to be released. Police hope more citizens will keep calling, providing useful information.”

Uighurs have condemned the police's campaign to investigate the riots and the following trials as lacking transparency and fairness. Many of these people have been sentenced to death without evidence that proves their participation in the atrocities, argues a young woman. She continues, that just because, “Their pictures have been plastered across every neighbourhood since September doesn't mean they are suspects. An accusation by an anonymous caller is considered evidence strong enough to send Uighurs to prison if not sentence them to death.”

By late October it had become obvious from reports and well founded evidence from the arrests - which is usually the case in these revolts- that the vast majority of Uighurs participating in the unrest were mostly from the lower end of the social ladder; the unprivileged, unemployed, poor and economic migrants from the South-Western Xinjiang prefectures where serious economic dislocation and impoverishment is particularly noticeable.

Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, is stretched between two branches of the Tianshan mountain range in a south to north axis divided by the city centre that features Islamic design motifs. On the one side lies the traditional Uighur area south of the city, and on the other a post-1949 part-inhabited mostly by Chinese Han which lies to the North. European luxury cars, men in suits and women wearing fashionable branded cloths in a Western setting is the Chinese standard signalling the recently attained wealth in the Han part of the town.





Photograph 47



Photograph 48: Buses and illegal cab drivers are the main means of transport for Uighurs in a coal polluted environment in the Southern areas consisting largely of damaged houses and soviet style drab apartment blocks.



Photograph 49

The centre of the city has been for the most part demolished to make way to government buildings, shopping areas and hotels but there are still a number of small Uighur parts remaining as if a village within a city that so far survived the demolition.

When travellers reach the central bazaar with its small alleyways, the stark contrast of Urumqi soothe the eyes- skyscrapers and commercial malls adjoining brick homes, outdoor markets, Islamic building facades and welcoming neighbourhoods full of colours and activity in an otherwise grey and luxurious cityscape alike most Western cities.



Photograph 50

It is far the most interesting part of Urumqi. Uighur women stroll along the market streets here wearing multicoloured silk skirts and nylon stockings. Uighur men in skullcaps meet near the mosques and the Bazaar to haggle over prices at the street stalls that are noticeable in all directions. The Bazaar and its surroundings is home to Uighur newcomers and economic migrants from the South of Xinjiang.

Photograph 51



Originating from poor rural areas and remote villages from the South Uighur migrants often face an enormous cultural shock when arriving in Urumqi. In this Han dominated pork eating environment far away from their oases of traditionalism they feel excluded, rootless and isolated having no other choice but to turn inward. Most of them have received Uighur education in their places of origin (Chinese education system divides minorities into Minkaomin as the one who choose to attend minority schools and Minkaohan as the ones who receive education in a Chinese Han school and in Mandarin) thus finding it hard to communicate in a big metropolis where Han speaking people constitute the majority.

Han businesses employ almost exclusively Han workers having as a second choice Urumqi Uighurs that have studied in Han language

schools and as a result have learned to live in a Han staffed environment as second-class citizens. Hans in Urumqi view their own culture as progressive. They know little about Uighur culture- particularly of the ones from the oases- which they view as backward and conservative.

It is not only Han that look down at Uighur migrants from the South but also Uighurs born and raised in Urumqi have adopted many of the `Han stereotypes of Uighurs such as being lazy and old fashioned. Minkaohan Uighurs in Urumqi have always been a minority living in close proximity to the Hans. Although they have resisted the danger of culture assimilation and avoided mixing overtly with Hans they soon realized the economic potential and career advancement offered by China's boom.



Photograph 52

Many of them work for the communist party in government jobs, others are skilled labourers, administrators and employees in the private sector along with Han Chinese.

Some are employed as educators, others own small- medium size businesses and the rest have attained wealth by trading or providing services to-among others - Han Chinese, Russian, Kazaks, Uzbeks and Pakistani businessmen who visit Hualin commercial districts to buy thousands of cheaply manufactured products shipped there directly from Guangzou and other Eastern provinces. Rich Minkaohan who have strong contacts in the government and can afford bribing officials for issuing passports send their children directly to study abroad in high schools in the United States, Australia, Germany and other Western countries with strong Uighur diasporas.

Uighurs who received Uighur education -thus fluent in Uighur- refer to Mandarin speaking Uighurs as the “fourteenth nationality”⁶ due to the fact that there were thirteen officially recognized nationalities in Xinjiang before 1949 and thus implying that another nationality has come into existence: Uighurs who mainly speak Mandarin. These minorities consider themselves both Chinese and Uighur but feel alienated from both nationalities.

Most Minkaohan in Urumqi choose to send their children into Han language schools so that they can learn to compete successfully with Han children. For Minkaohan the quality of education that their children receive in Chinese schools is much better than in Uighur schools; most books are written in Mandarin, resources are better and teachers more qualified.

More importantly, Minkaohan believe that by obtaining education in a Mandarin school Uighur kids will not pose a threat to the dominant Han culture and will be welcomed to participate in the region's day to day affairs. This serves their aims to challenge the Chinese versions of Uighur history, mobilize Uighur people to unite and create a new Uighur Pan-Turkic identity that has close ties with the Turkic world on the West. Although they consider themselves as Muslims Minkaohan stress the importance of education in Han schools as a means of undermining Islamic education offered in Uighur schools. Minkaohan view religion as a barrier to cultural innovation and economic development which they see as the only path to strengthen Uighur national identity.

The extent to which both Urumqi Minkaohan and Minkaomin –originating from the West value Islamic religion, the social group to which they belong, the level of openness to Chinese culture, their economic prosperity but also the distance from Urumqi to Kashgar (about 1000 kilometres) separates them from each other. Thus Uighurs shouldn't be considered in any case as a united ethnic group with a single identity. Instead, conflicting local identities are at stake that are formed in terms of social group, Islamic identity and occupation.

Indeed, Uighurs from the West have more reasons to complain and express dissatisfaction with the Chinese administration. This is especially true within Kashgar prefecture as the demolition of the old Uighur towns, religious restrictions and the recent Influx of Han Chinese encouraged and funded by the government's master plan-also contributing to the rising unemployment among Uighurs and profoundly affecting population distribution and power relations- to turn the region into a manufacturing hub the "New Silk Road"- linking China to Central Asian developing economies and East Europe.

During my fieldwork research in Xinjiang I came across many examples that suggest a stark division between Uighurs Minkaohan from Urumqi and Uighurs Minkaomin. Minkaomin migrating to Urumqi for studies or work purposes feel the differences between both groups are extremely significant. They consider that Urumqi Minkaohan due to the long-standing intensive interaction with Hans have been assimilated. Upon arrival, Uighur Minkaomin are shocked to encounter Minkaohan residing in Urumqi as immediately they come across the deviations from Uighur Islamic religiosity and Uighur traditions as exercised in their places of origin more than 1000 kilometres on the other side of the desert. To name a few; alcohol drinking, the relaxation of religious practices such as fasting and prayer, pre-marital relationships, headscarf, inability to speak Uighur properly and a more positive attitude about being part of China and mixing with Hans are all reasons fuelling a contempt between Minkaohan and Minkaomin.

More importantly, a barrier that prevents the unification between Minkaohan and Minkaomin is

the economic prosperity that most Minkaohans have achieved since China's boom. Many Minkaohan have attained a middle class status or significant wealth from overtly interacting with the Hans, something that has led many Minkaomin to believe that the only Uighurs who have benefited from the Chinese development are Minkaohan.

This sentiment has been reinforced by the fact that all important government jobs and cadres occupied by Uighurs-though always second to Chinese Han- are given to Urumqi or Turpan Minkaohan excluding thus the West prefectures and Minkaomin Uighurs from running the show.

Many Minkaomin go as far as to claim that Minkaohan collaborate with their Chinese rulers against other Uighurs and there is a lot of exaggerated suspicion rooted about one another. From the very beginning of my research I realized that every attempt to mix Minkaohan and Minkaomin ended up a disaster. In the worst situation one of the two would offer a silly excuse for leaving immediately upon encounter, they would debate and argue about the differences between the two or at the very best they would be reluctant to speak of their experience. Almost certainly in our next individual encounter they would confidentially denounce each other providing different notions about Uighurness and Islam.

Minkaomin arriving to Urumqi have no other option but to stay near the city centre where they will most certainly find some friends or family from their hometown who can offer support and some sort of cheap illegal lodging (since the house registration system forbids migrants from registering in another city without being employed). Furthermore, since they identify strongly with Islam they spent most of their time around in the Da Bazaar which offers quick access to one of its many mosques for the daily prayers. Da Bazaar also offers the best chance for Uighurs to seek employment. There they wait usually for a Minkaohan that needs a day or two cheap labour, someone to paint his wall, make small repairs or carry some furniture around. Others will work as sellers in the market stalls, second hand and antique markets, selling CD's and DVD's, stolen mobile phones, telephone cards, or if they have strong local contacts they will find temporary employment in a Uighur restaurant.

Minkaomin Uighurs are thus engaged into an unofficial economy located mainly south of the city and more specifically around Da Bazaar.

UIGHUR UNOFFICIAL ECONOMY

Photograph 53



The above photo depicts the vast the differences between the developed-high Han part of Urumqi in the background of the photo and the undeveloped Uighur part on the bottom near Da Bazaar (Big Bazaar) and the Central mosque. It is here that Uighur Minkaomin choose to settle upon arrival to Urumqi; far away from the spotlight they stroll around the small alleyways, markets and side streets looking for every opportunity to make a living.



Photograph 54: Uighurs beg whilst Hans stroll around the shopping malls of Urumqi



Photograph 55



Photograph 56



Photograph 57



Photograph 58



Photograph 59



Photograph 60

However, in the context of the fight against separatism Chinese government officials found a new pretext to justify repressive measures in Urumqi.

Since most of the Uighurs arrested were not Urumqi residents -but Minkaomin - economic migrants from Kashgar and other prefectures south-West of the province spending most of their time in the Uighur markets in the city centre where the violence broke out, the government have initiated a plan to put under tight scrutiny and claim back the centre of Urumqi and specifically the area from the Da Bazaar and the central mosque to Xinjiang University and Dawen.

Only a few months after the July incidents the government proceeded to the demolition of traditional Uighur markets , banned street markets such as Yan an Lu street market and sellers from selling fruits and vegetables in stalls. Furthermore, Uighur neighbourhoods adjoining the markets have been demolished:



Photograph 61



Photograph 62



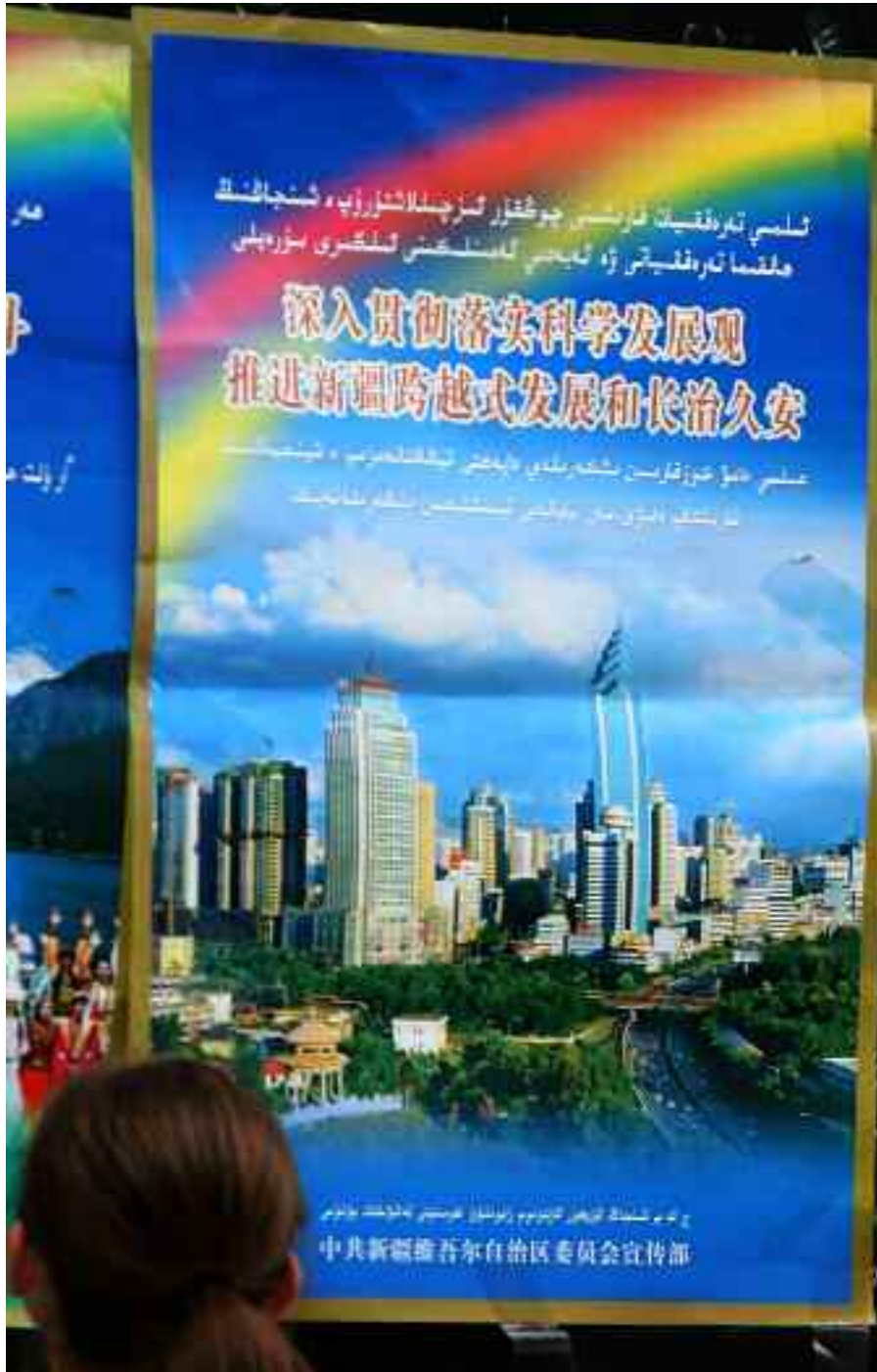
Photograph 63: “We have moved into a new location” is written in Uighur and a whole market area with hundreds of Uighur small scale businesses has been turned into a huge construction site.



Photograph 64: Yan an Lu street market used to take place here daily for decades. A banner and Communist party guards have replaced it forbidding sellers to bring their stalls.



Photograph 65:



Photograph 66: “Put the meaning in your heart of scientific development, leap forward development and long stability in Xinjiang”

The government gives only a few days notice to residents in Uighur neighbourhoods to evacuate their houses so that they can avoid dissatisfied locals staging protests. If locals protest evacuation, demolition takes place usually forcibly at night.

Posters and announcements are being placed on walls where the Propaganda bureau informs the residents that demolition is a necessary step forward for development and regeneration projects to take place that will bring prosperity and higher living standards for the locals.

The second hand markets in Erdoqiao and the adjoining neighbourhoods a vast area in the city centre is been demolished whilst residents and small businesses have been asked to move out. Once a meeting point for the everyday stroll and a place to find a good bargain, the second hand market (see photo below) is now empty awaiting also to be knocked down.





Photograph 69

Uighur houses and neighbourhoods are being demolished and high rises are taking their places signalling the massive influx of Han Chinese in Urumqi's city centre. What Chinese officials failed to account for, is the cultural significance of the market, this socioeconomic institution; an alternative to big supermarkets (as it is akin to forms of direct marketing), and the significant role that the market has to the everyday lives of Uighurs -especially for migrants- for whom the market is both a meeting place and a chance to escape from their daily routine in their households. A Uighur migrant from Kashgar addresses precisely the migrant's attachment to the space; 10 years after arriving at Urumqi he decided to see the sights of the city and, "All I saw was People's park. And that was full of Chinese... I've spent more than half my life here, but I hardly left these streets."

The demolition of the Uighur areas and markets in Urumqi's city centre -alike Kashgar's old town demolition- shouldn't be seen as an isolated measure rather it should be seen as one of a series of measures implemented after the July incidents aiming- according to state controlled media- at bringing back social security and harmony in Xinjiang following ethnic tension and unrest. Nevertheless, instead of showing interest to ease the tension through dialogue and more freedom of expression and openness Beijing adopts extreme measures such as surveillance and crash integration as parts of a pattern to gain control of the region. Indeed, since October 2009 more than 10.000 surveillance cameras have been positioned into sensitive areas of Urumqi.

Initially the widespread use of surveillance cameras has been approved and installed at schools, buses, Uighur neighbourhoods, mosques but gradually coverage continues to grow in every street and dark corner until there are no blind spots in Urumqi.





Photograph 72: Police clean-up operations in progress.



Photograph 73

Almost in every corner of Urumqi a Uighur seller is being arrested or being thoroughly searched by armed forces and undercover police. The clean up-campaign -officials argue- is targeting audiovisual material containing overseas propaganda aiming to rise separatism in China.

However, Uighurs are being arrested for possession and distribution of religious and educational recordings containing Muslim prayers, trips to Mecca, Uighur religious songs and so on. The clean-up operation confiscating religious print and audio visual material has alienated Muslim Uighurs who see the various restrictions imposed by the Chinese authorities on religious freedom as a direct attack on their Islamic identity. In addition, an official propaganda against Islam is taking place aimed at demonizing Muslims as posters around the city are implying that areas surrounding mosques are places where criminals breed.



Photograph 74



Photograph 75: “Preventing fire is a common duty of the whole of society” is written in giant posters on every fire brigade vehicle in Urumqi. The poster depicts the Central Mosque and Da Bazaar in red as if a fire broke out from there whilst two officers are overlooking the fire ready to intervene. This is clearly implying that Muslim Uighurs might be responsible for arson and that it is their duty to prevent it.



Photograph 76: In this propaganda poster two police officers are overlooking the Central mosque and at the same time saluting the Communist flag of China. These are the Revenue police in charge of consumer protection and keeping unlicensed sellers and illegal material off the streets. It implies that Central mosque and the surroundings might be the centre of illegal trade and other activities.



Photograph 77: This message from the police is addressed to Chinese tourists (only in Mandarin) who visit Da Bazaar and the Central Mosque. Police Warning “Bazaar and Mosque Tourist Attractions- All kinds of people. Please take care of your belongings. Close your car doors while stopping”.

Party policy on religion over the last 20 years has marked a departure from the openness and gradual acceptance and relaxation on religious practices of the 1980s. Since the watershed events of 11th September 2011 terrorist attacks and the subsequent “war on terrorism” China's relationships between religion and state power have deteriorated as for the Chinese officials seem to see a direct link between Terrorism, Islam and Uighur separatism.

Although there is no evidence about the Uighurs held in Guantanamo being linked with the Taliban, Chinese security forces have swamped the borders leading to Afghanistan and Pakistan -south West of Kashgar- suggesting growing concern about Taliban religious fighters operating in Xinjiang.

A series of repressive measures have been implemented by Chinese authorities who try to convince the world that Uighur Muslims do pose a domestic terrorist threat.

Religious education has been banned and religious buildings and gatherings require authorization.

Festivals have been banned also.

Pilgrimage to Mecca has been banned and those permitted to undertake the Haji are chosen by Islamic Association of China which grants permission only to a few Hui minority Muslims and official cadres.



Photograph 78

Since the unrest in Urumqi the public security bodies have announced the start of a thorough operation to further eliminate the public security dangers continuing the hunt for riot suspects that escaped arrest or ranked on high alert for terrorist plots including religious extremism. As a result, Chinese police and military personnel are everywhere in the Uighur part of the city of Urumqi guarding public buildings, positioned around the mosques, operating checkpoints and stop and search any Uighur that happens to pass by. Arrests and beatings for no obvious reasons are common practices whilst undercover and police with riot gear at the ready are occupying premises in and around the mosque- as if adding insult to injury- showing thus no respect to holy places not even during prayer time.



Photograph 79: Army officers in standby observe the prayer from the Minaret at the central Mosque in Da Bazaar in Urumqi.



Photograph 80: Muslims start gathering for the Friday prayer. Chinese authorities do not allow worshippers to enter and use the square for the prayer.



Photograph 81: Authorities shut the door to the square contributing also to the growing frustration of the gathering crowd.



Photograph 82: The square is used as parking place for rich Chinese and tourists who buy souvenirs from the touristic shopping mall-owned by Chinese Han- next to the central mosque. According to Chinese law Muslims cannot use the squares to pray.



Photograph 83: On the other side of the square Chinese park luxury cars. Then get photographed.



Photograph 84



Photograph 85: Due to restricted access to the square believers have no other choice but to pray on the main road exposing themselves to the risk of the cars.



Photograph 86

Mahmut, a Uighur carpet seller from Kashgar, is not surprised by the police presence in the mosques as he argues it is not the first time that Muslims are being targeted in mosques. Images of religious repression in Urumqi are strikingly familiar because the same things are happening in his homeland -Kashgar- for decades.

His father, a well known and respected carpet dealer of Kashgar has been serving an indefinite sentence in prison as 6 years ago he the visited Middle East for business purposes because most of their clients are of Arabic origin. There he visited mosques and bought religious books and materials for educational purposes that are unavailable in China. Upon arrival he was suspected of getting into contact with religious extremists and was taken into custody without a trial or a court hearing, "Just a police report was enough".

Mahmut like many other Uighurs from Kashgar believe that- unlike many Urumqi Uighurs (Minkaohan) who for years have benefited from the Chinese influx- Kashgaris have much more to complain about. China discriminates against on Uighurs from the Kashgar and Hotan prefectures limiting the international travel to the minimum and having stopped issuing passports for Uighurs residing there for years now. He adds that:

"Myself, members of our family and friends are frequently subjected to arrests and interrogations. During the July violence I received calls from international clients who were worried about the situation in Xinjiang and about my well-being. Next morning police shut my store and questioned me in regard to these phone calls."

In September 2009 Li Zhi, Urumqi's Communist Party secretary, was replaced not because of failing to prevent the unrest and growing dissatisfaction among Uighur minorities but because Chinese Han protested demanding changes in the leadership of Xinjiang. The public protests came after rumours of suspected syringe attacks taking place in the busy streets in Da Bazaar that targeted Urumqi's Han population. Hans claimed that Uighurs were behind the attacks, something that caused more paranoia and racism in Urumqi streets.

Enver Tohti, a Uighur in diaspora, has worked during the 80s as a surgeon in Urumqi's hospital.

He observes that syringe attacks are not instigated by separatist forces to undermine ethnic unity as official reports claimed- and sees no direct link between the attacks and politics in the region. He claims that, "Syringe attacks are not new to Xinjiang. These incidents have been taking place since the 70s as some drug addicts use hypodermic needles to rob passers in order to buy drugs."

The media claimed there were hundreds of Chinese Hans claiming they were attacked but surprisingly the hospitals confirmed only a few incidents where no one seemed to be infected. Following the Han protests Wang Lequan, Xinjiang's communist Party secretary, was removed from office. Despite the replacement of the party's secretary by the former Hunan party secretary Zhang Chunxian- a more liberal politician- prejudice in Xinjiang grew even more and day to day life in Xinjiang and the security measures remained.

Indeed across every Uighur social class in Urumqi the consequences of both the July incidents and the syringe attacks as well as the official propaganda are highly noticeable.

Unemployment among Urumqi Uighurs grew as many Chinese owned businesses such as Nissan and China Mobile fired many Uighurs- even Minkaohan- for no obvious reasons. An employee in Nissan told me that since the unrest all Chinese Han employers' and colleagues' attitudes changed towards him even though they knew he was completely innocent and had nothing to do with the riots.

"I was bullied at work for what Uighurs did last July. Colleagues treated me with hatred and suspicion. Two months later I was fired. Together with another two Uighurs."

Another Uighur- medicine student- has been refused entry to the local supermarket for months after the July incidents, a common practice also by many Chinese run businesses out of fear or prejudice.

From my own experience, more often than not, Chinese taxi drivers have been refusing to stop to my call for a taxi as because of my European look Hans tend to confuse me for a Uighur. Furthermore in a number of instances I have witnessed racism and discrimination towards Uighurs by Chinese staff in banks, restaurants, busses, public services, train stations, trains and so on.

English First language center has forbidden Uighur staff to speak Uighur in class, during breaks, on school premises, not even on the phone. In addition they have been forced to change their names with Chinese or English names so they don't sound Uighur.

Other English schools have forbidden foreign teachers to live in Uighur parts of the city offering the debatable excuse that it is not safe. Some explicitly told foreign teachers that "Uighurs are Muslim separatists". They even went as far as to fire staff that did not accept to move out from the Uighur part to a Chinese part.

Travel agencies, tourist guides and businesses together with police have also contributed to the ghettoization of Uighur areas. Many issued notices to avoid visiting Urumqi's city centre due to criminal activities but also travelling to Southwest and Northwest of Xinjiang in the Illi and Kashgar prefectures.

State television continued to show small videos and raw footage from the riots for months to come following the riots, thus contributing also in keeping the tension up. A permanent exhibition with images from 5 July has been held in Youhao- a Chinese area- displaying images of Hans in the hospital injured with pouring blood down their faces. Such images as with Tibetan riots have inflamed an anti-Uighur sentiment among sections of Han populations not only in Xinjiang but all over China. Regularly, interviews of Han victims have been broadcasted several months later speaking about the attacks whilst children of the dead spoke about how much they miss their beloved ones. Similarly China daily have had published throughout 2010 several

featured stories of Chinese orphans whose parents were killed by Uighurs.

Surprisingly there were not any similar reportage or interviews neither of the families of the dead Uighurs in Shaogan factory in Guangzou nor from the 16 Uighurs executed for participation in the riots, not to mention the ones missing, arrested, or serving long term sentences in prison still unable to contact their families.

Official reports have placed the blame squarely on all Uighurs for the riots making no distinction between them.



Photograph 87 Rebiya Kadeer's Trade Center, once a non profit organization aimed to provide jobs for Uighur women and the unprivileged has been shuttered and slated for destruction since the July riots. The Chinese government has blamed the exiled Uighur leader as responsible for the ethnic violence.



Photograph 88

Despite the seeming calm many Xinjiang citizens believe that the tension will continue to be a crucial factor between Uighurs and Hans. Uighur official language has been virtually eliminated from university studies, popular literature has been banned, migrant students in Urumqi are forced to leave during summer vacations.

The Uighur language has been banned from being taught to foreigners, whilst the issuing of new passports and renewals have been stopped until further notice.

It is little surprise, therefore that Uighur anger has not diminished almost two years after the Urumqi unrest. Many Minkaomin Uighurs have rushed to abandon Urumqi for their safety of their hometowns. Minkaohan blame Minkaomin for the unrest feeling they have to suffer the consequences though completely innocent.



Photograph 89

What lies ahead is difficult to answer. The Tarim basin in Xinjiang hold immense oil reserves, the province of Xinjiang is the richest in mineral wealth and agriculture whilst tourism and trade with neighbouring central Asian states is booming. The clearly delineated borders with 7 central Asian states and China and the strong economic, political, diplomatic and military cooperation among them suggests the existence of a political and security bloc that could tip the global balance of power. China is treated by its central Asian neighbours as a world power and its influence continues to grow in South-East Asia. Xinjiang-strategically located in the crossroad of different civilizations- is far too important for China's big ambitions and any discussion- and hopes of Uighurs in diaspora- about an independent East Turkestan state is doomed to fail.

In addition many questions remain about the true goal of Xinjiang Uighurs. From my own experience living in Xinjiang Uighurs are geographically and culturally quite diverse (Kashgar is 1000 kilometres away from Urumqi) thus different localities and social groups hold different concepts of Uighur identity.

To this one should add the dichotomy between Minkaohan and Minkaomin Uighurs -a distinction created by the Chinese education in Xinjiang- and especially the ones from the lower and middle classes who identify more with the hometown or religion instead of Uighurness.



Photograph 90

On the other hand the July unrest and the following crash assimilation imposed by the government's strike hard measures might isolate Uighurs even more from Hans thus making them more aware of their "otherness".

Whilst it is too early to speak about of a Pan Uighur identity what seems more certain is that in the following years Xinjiang's Uighurs from the western prefectures (Kashgar-Hotan) will turn even more to their local culture and Islamic religion. With the old Uighur parts in Urumqi being demolished by bulldozers and with Uighurs and Islam being demonized by government and media, more and more Uighurs will radically move inward to their hometowns.

The mutual contempt between Uighurs and Hans will grow as more Chinese Han penetrate the Western region especially after China's plan to revive the old Silk Road.

In this project Beijing plans to operate 7 new airports in Xinjiang by 2015. A multi-billion dollar expansion of the railway promises to link China with Europe in only a few days. Kashgar will become a key trading and manufacturing hub alike China's coastal provinces.

From there fast trains will ship directly to Europe, Middle East and Asian countries through Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan and Russia.

In Pakistan, China is reconstructing the KKH (Karakoram Highway) and Azad (Pakistani) Kashmir (since the earthquake that destroyed most of it) so that their products can reach the port of Karachi in the south of Pakistan and from there shipped directly saving both on transportation costs and time (compared to when shipped from Guangzhou). In all the neighbouring countries, Chinese traders and sellers are welcomed and the counterfeit products have the biggest share of the market.

According to the plans, Kashgar will boom as a trading paradise as during the Silk road era-1000 years ago. Unemployment will decrease and together with it, the tension and dissatisfaction. Indeed Beijing hopes that the masterplan will have financial but also political gains as the resulting economic boom will end decades of hostility and disturbances among Uighurs and Hans.

But many Uighurs fear that the plans for turning Kashgar to the centre of Xinjiang and Asia's main producer and exporter is just an excuse for the demolition of the Uighur areas and that Uighurs will not benefit from the economic boom. As noted by Mahmut, a resident in the old city of Kashgar:

"The influx of millions more Hans into the region will endanger our own culture. Look around you and you will see our properties and religious sites being turned into commercial malls and business opportunities for the Chinese newcomers to take advantage off. What if Kashgar booms and Kashgariliks don't have equal opportunities with the Hans? We have seen this before in Xinjiang.

"Then they will say we don't speak good Chinese or we don't work hard enough and as always Hans will take all the good jobs."

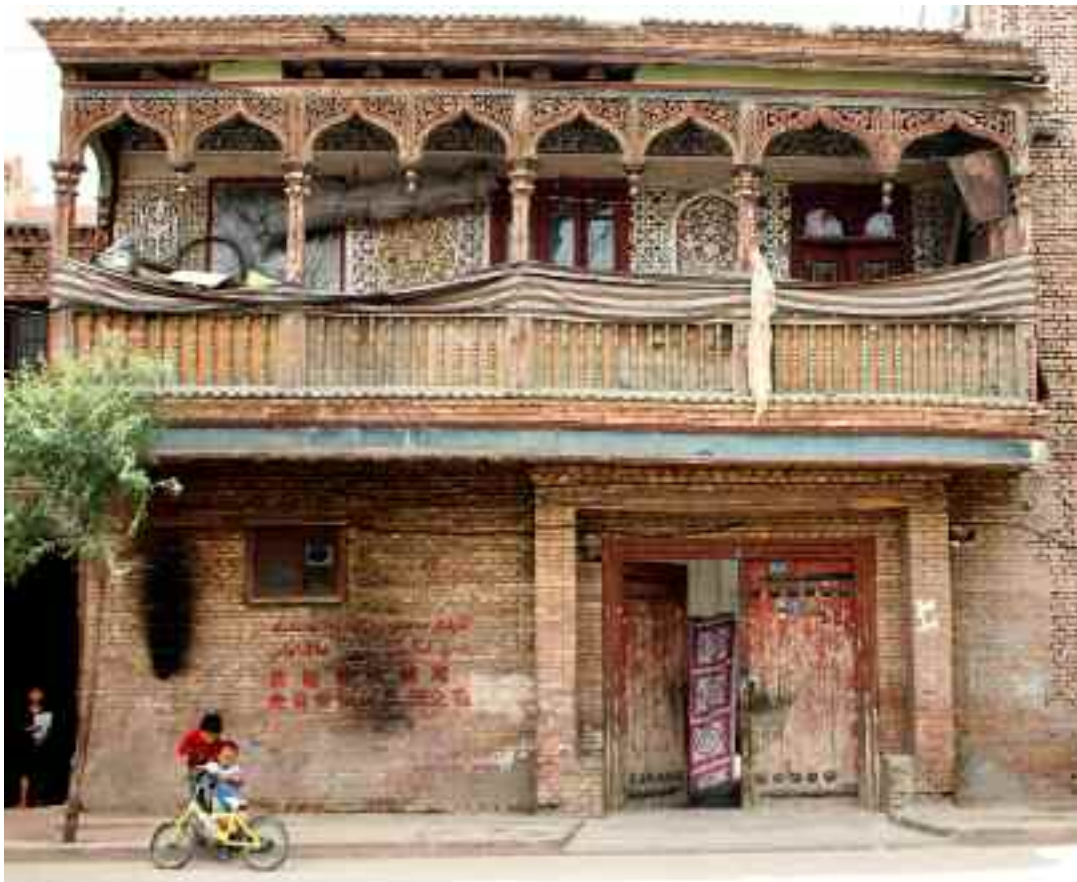


Photograph 91 Uighur Muslims stroll the old city in Kashgar soon to be demolished. The Chinese government has forbidden Muslims to wear the headscarf whilst working in the public sector. Chinese businesses do the same excluding from the labour force thousands of Muslim women in Kashgar that refuse to remove the headscarf.



Photograph 92

Saying it fears earthquake damage, Chinese government has started the demolition of 85% of the Uighur centuries old town. Official propaganda claims that most of it would be rebuilt and the reproduction will retain the ancient Islamic architecture preserving Uighur culture. On the contrary, Uighurs in pain are relocated whilst mid rise apartments, plazas and development projects are taking their place. The Government has decided to turn a small part of the old town into an open air museum for tourists to visit.



Photograph 93: Traditional Islamic architecture in Kashgar



Photograph 94: A homeless Uighur sleeps by the old city walls



Photograph 95: 2009. Uighur quarter before demolition



Photograph 96: 2011. After demolition, plans for progress are in full swing. An artificial lake has been constructed in the area where once was the centre of the Uighur quarter.



Photograph 97: First generation Chinese kids enjoy a sunny day at the lake. Their parents have benefited from the move West policy of China who provides funding for Chinese Han to settle down in Xinjiang and start up businesses.



Photograph 98

The regeneration project to transform Kashgar's ancient city once the centre of the Silk Road to a modern city has had a big impact not only to the local Uighur Bazaar economy that depends heavily on its central location but also to the everyday life of the people. Children's games in the Uighur neighbourhoods have become a risky adventure as the physical environment is being transformed into a massive construction site.



Photograph 99 The Sunday animal Bazaar where Silk Road traders use to trade their livestock has moved from the city centre to the outskirts of the city



Photograph 100

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Zhou Yan, Wang Pan & Pan Ying (8 July 2009). "'Unintentional scream' triggered Xinjiang riot". Xinhua (chinaview.cn).
- ² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/10/china-riots-Uighurs-han-urumqi>)
- ³ Ray Yep. "Economic Downturn and Instability in China: Time for Political Reform?" Brookings Northeast Asia Commentary, No. 28. April 2009; Austin Ramzy. "Migrant Workers Suddenly Idle in China." Time Magazine.
- ⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/25/china-globaleconomy>
- ⁵ <http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-internal-migrants/p12943>
- ⁶ Justin Rudelson "Oasis Identities" p. 128

Periodically, the issue of China's actions in its Northwestern province of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region comes to the fore. The most recent of these incidents was in July 2009 when so-called riots in the region led to the arrest and detention of many Uighurs as well as the deaths of many involved in what began as peaceful protests. Portrayed by the media in China, and to some extent the West, as the violent rioting of extremist separatists, rampaging and killing ethnic Han, the events have fallen away from scrutiny and a more truthful and impartial account has been given little opportunity to surface.

This essay recounts the run up to July 2009 in XUAR and provides an eyewitness account of the events and their aftermath. They are presented here in a bid to kick start the type of dialogue with the Chinese authorities needed to help China's anti-imperialist ambitions have better realisation within its own borders.

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