A Word about Ourselves

The ‘Resilience’ of Islam and Muslim Minorities

This issue of *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Volume 26, Number 1, has been put together by our guest editors M. Hakan Yavuz and Payam Foroughi who have also provided the introduction. Coordinating with the contributors to this issue through two major international conferences held at the University of Utah and at Harvard University, the guest editors have successfully brought together this valuable collection of articles on Central Asia.

While examining these papers through the editorial process, I was struck by the prevalence of one important theme that reverberates through all of the historical and contemporary accounts relayed in the collection—that even though in Central Asia Islam, for an extended period, was under pressure from the state, ‘it never came close to losing its cultural salience’ (in the words of contributor, Vera Exnerova). Though banished from the public as well as the private space, the practice of Islam and the Islamic way of life could not be fully extricated from the social and cultural fabric of Central Asian society.

Preserved by the elderly and its basic cultural traditions practiced by all, whether it was the adherence to dietary restrictions applying to the consumption of pork and alcohol, or the practice of circumcision, or the observance of birth and burial rituals, or the celebration of the two annual festivals marking the *Hajj* and the end of *Ramadhan*, Islamic practices remained embedded in the local cultures throughout the region. Defying state restrictions, violating decrees and *dictats* that banned the practice of religion, Muslim communities throughout Central Asia, as elsewhere, continued to observe Muslim practices.

This resilience of Islamic forms that linger on in societies in Central Asia and beyond, defying suppression, may perhaps be ascribed to the non-ritualistic nature of Islamic faith and practice, where the religious rites are merged into everyday life and where the rhythm of daily life is itself ritualized, merging the sacred with the secular while removing the demarcation between the two realms. This feature of Islamic faith, as a way of life that permeates the social fabric and molds the mindset, may perhaps explain much of Islam’s resilience in the face of suppression and external control.

The commonalities shared by the Muslim *ummah* which is variously distributed in Muslim majority countries and in Muslim minority communities, is reflected in the common Muslim response to events affecting fellow Muslims anywhere. Whether it is the suppression of faith and practice for meeting political ends or the labeling of nations and communities for the acts of the few, the response is widely felt and shared among Muslims everywhere and the reaction is thereby intensified. The suffering of some becomes the burden for all, and although they are not exactly ‘their brothers’ keepers’, they are all held accountable for the sins of others. This, in a very general sense, describes the situation in the Muslim world today. With sweeping labels inclusive of Islam and Muslim, generalized identities are created and generic responsibilities are ascribed. While the world tends to be parsimonious in doling out credit, it is very generous in disseminating blame, for the ordinary that characterizes the majority can be
ignored and the ‘good’ can wait in the wings for recognition, but the ‘evil’ must be immediately exposed and openly ‘vilified’ and widely generalized. This is the selective nature of the external response.

As for the ‘ummah’ itself, which is often erroneously classified as those living in Muslim majority countries, it maintains a comfortable distance from the Muslim minority communities and their problems. Of the 1.5 billion Muslims in the world today, 500 million live as minorities in 142 countries around the globe. It is among these communities that the resilience of Islam and the Muslim way of life is tested constantly and recurrently. While Muslim majority populations are spared the arduous exercise of ‘discovering’ and maintaining their social/cultural/ethnic/religious identity, they preoccupy themselves in promoting and seeking their ‘national identity’ through the furtherance of ‘national’ goals, and through the promotion of their economic and political rights, which are seen as the direct affirmation of their ‘identity’. What is striven for by the minority communities is taken for granted by those living as majorities, as their existence and their identity is daily reaffirmed through their national flag, their political establishments and their territorial boundaries.

Thus, while Islam may survive in Muslim majority countries as a residual religion and through inertia, it thrives in minority communities as it gains resilience from its continuous encounter with the ‘other’ and its constant reaffirmation of the ‘self’ and of identity in a diversified milieu. Indeed a more robust Islam prevails in minority communities who are at the frontline and always on the ‘battlefield’. For them, not only survival is at stake, but exciting possibilities are on the horizon to expand, strengthen, and enrich through the infusion of new ideas and methodologies that hold the promise of innovation and the prospects for application in a rich and diversified environment. Minorities talk the language of the host community and acquire means of communication that are familiar and acceptable to the ‘other’. Muslim minority communities are more effective articulators of Muslim causes and better representatives of the Muslim community on the world scene than the Muslim majority countries themselves that have become increasingly self-involved and complacent.

Finally, it is important to point out in this issue focusing on Central Asia that as the six Central Asian States have now acquired independent national status, they are no longer the Muslim minority communities that they once were as part of the former Soviet Union. They now join the Muslim ‘ummah’ as majority communities. It would be interesting to note the direction these communities in Central Asia will take in the long run, as they discover their Islamic cultural roots while enjoying majority status within their respective nations? What will be the core of their national identity? What will be the role of religion and ethnicity in these newly emerging nations? How resilient would Islam be in an environment that may be less suppressive? These are important questions that would continue to challenge and excite our imagination during the coming years. We will continue to monitor and provide coverage of developments in Central Asia in future issues of JMMA.

SALEHA S. MAHMOOD
Director & Chief Editor
State, Society and Islam in Central Asia: Introduction to the Special Issue

M. HAKAN YAVUZ and PAYAM FOROUGHI

Guest Editors’ Introduction

This special issue of the Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs features selected research papers with an emphasis on Central Asia—a region generally defined as the five post-Communist states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, plus Afghanistan and China’s northwest province of Xinjiang, wherein aside from millions of Han Chinese, close to eight million ethnic Turkic Muslims, most commonly referred to as Uighur, also reside. Based on this geographical designation, therefore, Central Asia encompasses a massive territory—estimated at 6.3 million km²—consisting of six states and a large province of another, and a total population nearing 100 million people. Our focus on Central Asia is all the more significant given the region’s problematic political climate, wherein instability and various degrees of dictatorial and authoritarian rule has been the norm for much of the region; and potentially extremist Islamist groups have taken footholds; where there is a widening intra- and inter-state income gap; and where natural resources (of petroleum, natural gas, cotton, gold, silver, and other minerals) are increasingly becoming sources of interest for rich consuming nations. The general interest in the region and the relative shortage of information and facts coming out from Central Asia also makes the focus of this special issue to be of importance.

The Collection

This special issue includes eight papers from authors who had presented the original versions at two scholarly conferences in the United States last year: “The Middle East & Central Asia Politics, Economics, and Society Conference” at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, 8–10 September 2005; and “The Central Eurasian Studies Society, Sixth Annual Conference” at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 29 September–2 October 2005.

In the lead article Meghan Simpson surveys the phenomena of women’s organizing in Central Asia and analyzes it on the basis of a balanced and highly complex theoretical study she conducted on gender politics and the globalization of women’s organizations in the region. Simpson based her analysis on the field work she conducted for two case studies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Simpson uses the term “globalizing gender politics”, identifying it as a “growing presence of gender in the discourses and practices” of domestic and regional actors, including the flourishing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society entities, involved with international development projects. She carefully dissects the stereotypes and assumptions—established a la “orientalism”—through which Western observers have often viewed the activities of the post-Communist East. She focuses on the “processes of localization” to alleviate
wrongfully held general assumptions, and what she labels as the “uncritical” taking up of
gender politics by the mainstream, of women’s groups and various forms of women’s
organizing in Central Asia. A critical analysis of the issue, she posits, would both focus
on the chasm of gender inequity in decision making in Central Asian societies and
grant ample focus on grassroots, traditional, and often informal—and non-Western—
community organizing where local women have played significant parts, such as the
ubiquitous mahalla entities.

The hardships encountered by a minority community are brought to our attention by
Malika Mirkhanova as she surveys the life and experiences of the Meskhetian Turks
(Akhyskha Turkleri) of the former Soviet Union. The author points out that the origins
of the Meskhetian Turks go back centuries, and that they may have been Georgian Chris-
tians who converted to Islam and adopted the Turkish language, or they may have been
part of the original Turkic tribes that settled in the Anatolian Plateau and the Caucasus.
No matter what the accurate ancient history of the Meskhetians may be, what is known is
that in contemporary twentieth and twenty-first century history, the Meskhetians have
endured much hardship, discrimination and violations of their basic human rights that
began with the Stalinist purges and exile—which took away nearly all of their wealth
and tens of thousands of surviving members from Georgia to Central Asia in 1944.
This was followed by ethnic conflict in one of their adopted homelands (Uzbekistan’s
side of the Ferghana Valley in 1989) where tens, perhaps hundreds, were reportedly
slaughtered ironically by other Muslim, Turkic-speaking Central Asians, and later suf-
f ered subtle and outright discrimination in yet another relocated home, that of the
region of Krasnodar in post-Communist Russia. For her qualitative study, Mirkhanova
interviewed several households of ethnic Meskhetians who have settled, of all places,
in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, and have retold their personal accounts and what they
remember from their forefathers, and their long plight for simple existence among
fellow beings, Muslim, Christian, or otherwise. Mirkhanova concludes that, as with
nearly all other minorities persecuted by majority rule worldwide, “the hardships of
the Meskhetian Turks are derived from social and political conditions not of their
making”. We comprehend from Mirkhanova’s important study that atrocities experi-
enced by minority groups, such as the Meskhetians, take place at times of economic
and/or political crises (such as the fall of the Soviet Union and the ongoing economic
hardships encountered by millions living in the post-Communist space), particularly
in places where local and national governments are highly corrupt and the rule of law
is de facto nonexistent or selective when enforced.

Three contributions in this issue enhance our understanding of the Xinjiang region. In
the first paper, Jennifer Taynen delves into a fascinating analysis of ethnicity and ethnic
politics within and between the major ethnic groups in China’s Xinjiang Uighur
Autonomous Region. Having lived and worked at the heart of the region, in the
ancient city of Urumqi, for two years, Taynen sees distinctions emerging within the
main non-Chinese population of Xinjiang, the ethnic Uighur community, who thanks
to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) skewed emigration and discriminatory
ethnic policies, now constitute a minority in their own motherland. She dissects
the peculiarities—cultural, psychological, political, and particularly lingual and
educational—of the Uighur, comparing two prototypes: the Min kao Min, those who
are schooled and communicate easily in the Uighur language, and the Min kao Han,
the growing minority of Uighurs who have been increasingly “sinofied”, attending
Han schools, communicating primarily in Chinese, and often living and co-mingling
mainly within the Han community. Aside from interesting anecdotal evidence of the
distinctions between the two prototypical groups, Taynen concludes that the factors of globalization (a.k.a. Westernization), the rising numbers of Han immigrants in Xinjiang, and the impending CCP educational reforms that are expected to de facto ban the teaching of Uighur language (already eliminated from the tertiary education system) from all levels of education in Xinjiang, to be highly instrumental in determining the future role of the Min kao Han. Taynen claims that though the ultimate place of the Min kao Han will likely be determined by an interaction of the said factors, the future of both inter- and intra-ethnic relations in Xinjiang is still not fully determined, with the Min kao Han’s future lying anywhere in the spectrum ranging from a leadership position among the general Uighur population; to a threat to the Chinese majority, “pawns who remain external and of little significance to the main [Sino-Uighur] conflict”; or even to become a potential tool for Sino-Uighur reconciliation.

Kristian Petersen provides us with an analysis of cyber-nationalism, mainly that of the Uighur diaspora established in the West. Among them, there have appeared a series of websites devoted to Uighur or East Turkistan nationalism, many calling for outright independence from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Petersen correctly concludes that the use of the Internet for nationalistic purposes has resulted in the reification of the Uighur identity. More importantly, he cautions that the various websites and their subjective information, important as they may be, may not provide a proper record of Uighur public opinion within Xinjiang. Whereas the Uighur cyber-leadership, for example, is generally calling for eventual and outright independence for Xinjiang and its supposed “homogenous” non-Han Turkic population, and whereas it has used cyberspace as a post-modern tool of an imagined community of Uighur nationalism, the reality may be that of a non-homogenous population, which nevertheless rightly seeks autonomy, increased cultural freedoms, and respect for its fundamental human rights, but not necessarily secession from China.

Eric Hyer has conducted a survey of China’s policy towards Uighur nationalism. Chinese policy on this issue, according to Hyer, has been multifarious: on the one hand it has attempted to suppress any call for greater autonomy, which it views as being synonymous to an outright demand for secession; on the other, in recent years, with the establishment of the so called “Shanghai-Six” forum—made up of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—China has begun a regional security club to fight what it perceives as the “three evils” of “separatism, extremism, and terrorism”, all being issues that, to a variety of degrees, Central Asian states and Russia also have their own concerns about. Furthermore, due to its insatiable appetite for energy and a need to forge expanding regional economic links, China is viewing Central Asia—especially the petrol-rich state of Kazakhstan—as a region of opportunity that it finds of interest to influence. Needless to say, China’s interest in the region has raised regional and global eyebrows, notably Russia and the USA—and likely India as well. With regards to Uighur nationalism and China’s interests in Central Asia, Hyer brings a fascinating quote from a Chinese scholar that succinctly sums up Chinese interests and also dilemma: “[E]ither way we lose. If the Central Asian states fall apart, chaos spreads to China. If they manage to survive, Chinese minorities say, “Look, it works there. Why can’t we have a state of our own?” Thus, despite China’s brutal methods of suppressing dissent, including the persecution of Uighur nationalists, one thing that is clear is that it seeks secure relations with its neighbours and is not interested in instability in its bordering republics; and yet, success of China’s post-Soviet republics which were created on warped Stalinist imaginary ethnic boundaries, will also pose as “demonstration effect” for China’s own ethnic
minorities, whose sense of nationalism is likely to increase, rather than subside, in the coming years.

In one of the three papers focusing on Uzbekistan and the neighbouring region, Jason Strakes posits a theoretical model in determining the sources of political management in post-Communist Central Asia, those of elite control over natural resources (primarily petroleum, natural gas, and cotton fibre) which serve as sources of capital and cooption of the populace and interest groups; and the presence of informal social organizations based primarily on kinship ties and allegiance to local authorities, which assist the structuring of political association working as intermediaries between the state and the normally disparate multi-ethnic populations of Central Asian states. Strakes picks the three Central Asian cases of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, all petrol-rich states (as opposed to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which in their present conditions can be categorized as hydro-rich). He finds differences in the degree to which the independent variables of natural resource endowment and informal social structures serve as determinants for strength of political management. Among his three case studies, Strakes finds today’s Kazakh leadership as having the most success in establishing a concrete national identity, the Uzbek leadership resorting to violent repression, and the Turkmen state relying on a highly artificial nationalism, one with unlikely sustainable long-term prospects.

Vera Exnerova provides an analysis of the reasons for the survival of religious (Muslim) traditions in Central Asia, despite nearly seven decades of Communist rule. Exnerova conducted a study of Soviet Uzbekistan’s Ferghana Valley for the period 1930s through 1980s using archival material from both Russia and Uzbekistan. She tells us why local authorities in Uzbekistan—as in nearly all of Central Asia, were relied upon by Moscow to enforce Soviet anti-religious and atheistic regulations—were generally unsuccessful in their haphazard efforts. Exnerova’s essay is evidence that the pull of the local and traditional, the mahalla, and the syncretic Islamic norms and rituals practiced in Central Asia have been far stronger than that of the Soviet-imposed ideal of atheism and international Communism. Exnerova’s work confirms what S. Enders Wimbush had stated several years prior to the dissolution of the USSR: “common sense suggests that fourteen centuries of brilliant Irano-Turkic-Islamic culture cannot be quickly swept away by sixty-eight years of Russian-dominated Marxist–Leninist pseudo-culture.”2 Exnerova argues that aside from the attempt of the imposition of Soviet anti-religious policies in Central Asia, other important processes of demographic changes—in the form of a massive increase in the numbers of Central Asian Muslims as opposed to the emigrating Slavic population—were taking place, which in addition to socioeconomic challenges facing the region may well present a better understanding of the enduring influence of Islam and traditionalism in Soviet—and post-Soviet—Central Asia.

In a related theme, Didier Chaudet poses a critical question of concern to those interested in the whys and hows of the spread of extremist religious ideology, including terrorism and state violence. He asks: “Is Hizb ut-Tahrir an Islamist Threat to Central Asia?” Chaudet’s paper sheds light on the understudied theme of religious extremism in the post-Communist space. He gives us a brief historical background on the origins of Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation, HT) and dissects the reasons for the attractiveness of the Party to at least a segment of the population in the region. He reminds us that the phenomenon of Islamism and religious extremism is often simplified in the minds of the leaders of the transitional states of Central Asia, Western policy makers, and many students and scholars of the region. After the events of September 11 2001,
Chaudet contends, the “complexity of Islamism, the multiple causes of the insurgency and terrorism in Iraq, the roots of Muslim unrest, all factors that could result in a more complex analysis were avoided” by many scholars and researchers. He uses a process of elimination to analyze the impact and role of HT in Central Asia, pointing out that aside from HT, other currently viable forms of Islamisms in the region are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a militant organization that made headline news in the Autumn of 2000 when its armed members took three American mountain climbers and later four Japanese geologists hostage in southern Kyrgyzstan; and the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), a bona fide political organization in Tajikistan, which once fought a nasty civil war against remnants of the Tajik Soviet sympathizers (who continue to run the country today), a conflict that took over 50,000 lives. Chaudet argues that, as opposed to HT, the IMU lacks sufficient ideological base, an element required for long-term success and organizational consolidation. By the end of the 1990s, however, writes Chaudet, “the ‘theoretical’ branch of IMU [was] put aside in favour of the branch that was more jihadist and less inclined to intellectual or political thought and ideological complexities”. HT, on the other hand, is today composed of a “system of beliefs or ideology, which provides simple answers to complex questions”. Furthermore, as opposed to the IRP, which is a “national” political organization functioning solely in Tajikistan, HT is a pan-Central Asian and multinational organization vying to eventually form an ideal Islamic state in the region run by the Caliphate. Chaudet agrees with the general posit that HT can indeed pose an extremist and violent Islamist threat in Central Asia, but he cautions that such a threat can be a self-fulfilling prophecy given the fact that at the time being HT is still a non-violent group. However, it is possible that with the Central Asian governments’ hostility towards suspected Islamist activists, and the chronic economic woes still facing a large segment of an increasingly young Central Asian population, HT’s practice of non-violence may eventually change.

NOTES
1. Please note that the spelling “Uighur” appears to be more commonly used than “Uyghur”, thus “Uighur” has been used throughout this issue of the Journal, except where “Uyghur” is part of a direct quote or is from the title of a specific source or from the name of an organization.
Local Strategies in Globalizing Gender Politics: Women’s Organizing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

MEGHAN SIMPSON

Abstract

This research investigates the implications of globalizing gender politics for relations among local women’s organizations in and across two Central Asian countries—contemporary Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Globalizing gender politics refers to the growing presence of gender in the discourses and practices of a range of national, international, and transnational actors, working within Western frameworks of development, democratization, and civil society. Diverse forms of women’s organizing flourish across these countries, influenced by changing gender roles and relations, and by new access to material and discursive resources. Within the milieu of globalizing gender politics, much emphasis has been placed on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as a result of the recent shift to facilitate bottom-up development. At the same time, these organizations have been stereotyped for their dependence on aid and deference to donors, and their lack of cooperation and collaboration. This suggests a need to explore more deeply diverse forms of women’s organizing, beyond a focus on the women’s NGO sector as a homogenous body. I parse out layers of this organizing in and across Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Layers emerge as a result of the administration of material and discursive resources of globalizing gender politics, in accordance with assumptions and expectations of localized spaces. Investigating processes of localization allows for a more nuanced understanding of hierarchies and exclusions among diverse women and their organizations.

Introduction

Worldwide, issues pertaining to gender are hotly debated, with hope for international or transnational women’s activism endlessly challenged by “local” voices of discontent. Particularly regarding work in the name of development and democratization, there has been increasing pressure to heed the calls of local women and local movements. While the sequence of World Conferences on Women, beginning in 1975, has forced gender into a range of efforts for legislative, policy, and institutional reform, locally and internationally, criticism—namely, lodged by women on the “receiving end” of democratization and development programming—has denounced the marginality of and hierarchy and exclusivity within women-centred initiatives at a purportedly global level. In conjunction with a programmatic shift to bring about “bottom-up” change, attention and resources have shifted to local women’s organizations and movements, presumably linking local and global experiences. Yet, I suggest, aspects problematic to solidarity among women persist, particularly within the very processes of “imagining local”.

This research aims to shed light on the implications of globalizing gender politics not only for organizing at a local level, but also for intra-national relations among
organizations in and across contemporary Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, during the process of imagining local. Diverse forms of women’s organizing have flourished across these two countries, influenced by changing gender roles and relations and new access to material and discursive resources, made available through gender-centred initiatives. The multifarious factors affecting gender roles and relations have been discussed elsewhere; I focus specifically on interactions among organizations in and across these states, in the milieu of globalizing gender politics, drawing out comparisons and connections. By globalizing gender politics, as will be discussed, I refer to the processes of taking up gender in the discourses and practices of a range of national, international, and transnational actors, working within Western frameworks of development and democratization. In this context, local, women-centred initiatives have largely been carried out through non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Much emphasis has been placed on NGOs, as a result of the recent turn to facilitate bottom-up development; at the same time, these organizations have been stereotyped for their dependence on aid and deference to donors, and their lack of cooperation and collaboration—and hence, the lack of coherent local women’s movements. This suggests a need to explore more deeply the concept of women’s organizations, beyond a focus on NGOs or a homogeneous assumption of women’s movements. For this research, except where noted, women’s organizations refer to any group of individuals, working explicitly to confront issues pertaining to women; material and discursive resources include theoretical, technical, and financial means of support and influence; I use “localize” to emphasize the multi-layer and multilevel processes by which contexts—communities and territories—are structured, defined, or imagined.

The Methodology

I establish globalizing gender politics as the context for this study: the processes by which work by and for women at the global level has commingled with discourses of development and democratization, and the practical interventions lodged on their behalf. Central to this context are contemporary debates on international support for local civic organizing. These debates underlie the proliferation of NGOs as institutionalized civic actors across post-Soviet entities such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—countries on the “receiving end” of development and democratization efforts. From this context, I parse out pertinent aspects that are particularly relevant to the layering of women’s organizing in and across Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Layers, I contend, emerge as a result of the administration of material and discursive resources of globalizing gender politics, in accordance with assumptions and expectations of localized spaces. Investigating processes of localization allows for a more nuanced understanding of hierarchies and exclusions among diverse women and their organizations.

This research draws largely on fieldwork conducted across Kyrgyzstan; in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan; and the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO, Badakhshan Province) of Tajikistan over the course of two extended visits, in 2001–2002 and 2005. Fieldwork methods included active participant research with the Forum of NGOs of Kyrgyzstan, based in Bishkek; and semi- and unstructured interviews with a range of members of international organizations, local NGOs, and public officials across the two countries; as well as anecdotal evidence; casual conversations; participation in conferences, trainings, seminars, and roundtables; and analysis of local and international media and project and program reports. I focus primarily on Kyrgyzstan, taking Tajikistan as a case for comparison and connection; I use the change of power in
Kyrgyzstan in March 2005 as a start date for this discussion. The 2005 Kyrgyz parliamentary elections and their aftermath have had significant repercussions across the country, shaping new roles and relations among diverse actors, and opening spaces for gendered individuals to organize, to discuss their roles in specific contexts, and to participate in re-imaging these contexts. As such, this context provides a unique opportunity to explore the localizing implications of globalizing gender politics.

Globalizing Gender Politics

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan present particularly interesting locations for research, as both have been thrust into the international community as so-called developing and democratizing, post-socialist, sovereign states. They have been defined as transitioning capitalist economies, reforming systems of governance, and emerging civil societies; challenged by impoverished state structures and ambiguous state functions; plagued by dilapidated infrastructure; characterized by once high rates of literacy and professional skills, high birth rates, low levels of employment, high rates of internal migration and emigration, and sizable rural populations; and distinguished for a multitude of perceived destabilizing factors—regarding extreme poverty, the management of natural resources, porous borders, drug and arms trafficking, ethnic tensions, and renegade groups. As inhabitants of developing and democratizing countries, women of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been positioned on the “receiving end” of globalizing gender politics. New, Western material and discursive resources on women and gender have entered—first, through marginalized United Nations (UN) sponsored Women or Gender in Development programming, and more recently through initiatives to mainstream gender into a wide range of projects and programs. Layers and levels of targeted areas have emerged: regional (such as Central Asia, or Asia and the Pacific), state, and sub- or cross-state (such as the Ferghana Valley). Across both countries, numerous women’s organizations and networks exist, representing, in theory, local voices within the milieu of globalizing gender politics.

Particularly since the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985) and the initiation of World Conferences on Women, women’s organizing has received broad and steadily growing attention at the global level. The conception of these events can be largely attributed to a critical Women in Development (WID) movement, which has figured prominently in stressing the need to redistribute power globally, circumventing state authority, and accessing, integrating, and advancing women’s claims. These events have fostered the establishment of women’s programs within the structures of most Western multi- and bilateral organizations, operating internationally; they have created space for discussion on women’s concerns, needs, and interests and made available new material and discursive resources for women and women’s organizing. Documents like Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of 1979 and Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) of 1995 remain powerful mechanisms of international covenants. With support from international actors, a handful of prominent local women’s organizations across Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have made use of such documents, as tools with which to hold their respective governments accountable for ensuring gender equality, or to interact with women internationally. While striving to broaden and alter political and economic planning and programming for the good of women at multiple levels, a purportedly global women’s movement has thus intertwined with processes of democratization and development, as espoused by Western aid and assistance agencies.
The above presents somewhat of a beguiling situation, considering the emphasis of much women’s organizing on efforts to dismantle hierarchies and redistribute power globally. A handful of critics have pointed to the hierarchical nature of development and democratization—discourses and practical efforts—underscoring the numerous similarities between post-Cold War Western aid to transitioning states and the “development enterprise” cultivated in the Third World. Definitional debates on Western development and democratization (as transition), and their interrelations, are discussed in detail elsewhere. Both frameworks have been characterized by capitalist “triumphalism” and Western superiority, supported by evolutionary, teleological assumptions of “positive” change in a certain direction, toward pre-given ends. By way of these frameworks, and the “globalizing” impositions and interventions made on their behalf, the West is presented as an all-knowing, benevolent “parent”, instructing the naïve post-Soviet masses whose experiences with socialism or colonialism should be discarded altogether.

As a result, it is not surprising that, while trying to integrate women into global planning and policy-making, a range of disparaging voices have emerged. Particularly as a powerful women’s movement has extended its reach globally and commingled with frameworks of development and democratization, “Southern” and “Eastern” women—those on the receiving end, targeted by aid and assistance efforts—have denounced hierarchy and exclusions within work by and for women. In light of such criticisms, calls to revise potentially denigrating and divisive theorizing, planning, and policymaking at a contested and purportedly “global” level for “local” situations have surfaced. This has involved a shift to attend to and parse out the diverse, context-specific factors affecting women’s status in specific localities, and relations between men and women, in part by way of the concept of gender. Gender can be seen as both substantive—a topic of study, regarding how men and women are differently situated as a consequence of roles, processes, and institutions; and a dimension of study, a lens, through which a myriad of relations, interactions, and practices can be viewed.

The “New Policy Agenda”

In keeping with the turn to gender, purportedly global frameworks of development and democratization, as well as the initiatives made on their behalf, are now conceived to be consultative, sensitive to the needs of those—such as women—who had for long not reaped their benefits. It is unquestionable that attention is being paid increasingly to the significance of women and gender in a wide range of issues and contexts worldwide. Concurrently, the failure of “trickle-down” development policies, and of political and economic reform, have fostered a shift to sub-state actors; the “new policy agenda” of the 1990s stressed simultaneously neo-liberal economic policies and “good governance”—the promotion of democratic institutions and market reforms in developing and democratizing countries—thereby targeting actors who would carry out those functions lost with the roll-back of centralized state capacities. Non-governmental associations have been organized and engaged, as part of a turn to facilitate bottom-up change, to link global trends to local contexts and communities. Regarding work by and for women, this shift to local manifested visibly in the first NGO Forum at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. NGOs have been given the task to articulate and represent “real” women’s voices at the global level, to the international women’s movement, and vice versa; as actors within civil society, they have been charged with pressuring their respective governments to adhere to international doctrines and platforms such as the BPfA, CEDAW, and, more recently, the UN-promoted Millennium Development Goals.
That said, while NGOs and international actors have brought gender-related issues to the negotiating table, evidence hints that across post-socialist Eurasia authorities tend to select women- or gender-focused policies and planning as “soft options” in the development process—or mere Western ideals, which in the eyes of local officials, appear to involve no real consequences.

Women’s organizing is thus complexly situated: tied to a purportedly global intent to facilitate gender equality and to improve the status of women worldwide; working within a hierarchical state-based, international system; shaped by multifarious activities of international actors and positioned by access to and control over material and discursive resources; yet calling for the recognition of context-specific knowledge, gendered identities, and “everyday” experiences. In short, women’s organizations can be seen as both “global” and “local”. Then, as James Ferguson suggests, development institutions and practices, set in motion by the discursive regime of development, impinge upon how and by whom “local” is itself conceived. Understanding women’s organizing thus requires interrogating not only intersections of gender with other facets of social identity—intersections that affect how and why women organize as women—but also conceptions of local within which these intersections take place.

Developing, Democratizing, Easternizing, and Culturalizing

The milieu of globalizing gender politics is the broad context in which much organizing in the name of the local in and across Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can be understood. There are aspects of this context that are of central relevance to women’s organizing in and across these states. These aspects call attention to the formation of multiple, interrelated, and overlapping understandings of local, as well as the reasons for hierarchies and exclusions among women’s organizations.

The first aspect pertains to the assumption among many that, upon independence, the post-socialist states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space would “transition” to democracy and free-market economies if they adhered to specific policy directives and principles, and allowed for the emergence of civil society. Particularly relevant to women’s organizing across Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is the proliferation of internationally supported civil society strengthening programs, exemplifying the supposition of the significance of a vibrant civil society for development and democratization. The recent rise of the concept of civil society is linked to Western development and democratization fashions, to which post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are particularly vulnerable due to their “receiving” position in the international aid system. The notion of civil society is neither straightforward nor new; definitional debates about the concept require a paper alone, and have been summarized effectively elsewhere. In short, civil society is commonly understood as “the population of groups formed for collective purposes primarily outside of the state and marketplace” or as “an intermediate associational realm between the state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy from the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society.”

Two prominent issues of concern arise within this general frame of thinking. The first regards its normative character, which implies that civil society embodies particular types of organizational forms and certain “positive” values. Normative accounts of civil society as a “good thing” for democracy and development have influenced the ways in which policymakers worldwide have taken up the concept, leading efforts “build” civil society where it has been considered “absent”, and to strengthen civil
society where it is thought to be “weak”. The second issue is the notion of public space. In theorizing about civil society, public space normally excludes the organization and ties of family and kinship; it is typically viewed as being situated beyond the household. Putnam, for example, argues that civil society is composed of groups whose horizontal ties cross-cut, and can be contrasted with, these communities of kinship. This idea is drawn from the notion of “amoral familialism”, which painted a picture of nuclear families whose values led them to maximize short-term self-interest at the expense of wider altruism. Putnam also argues that the organizations and networks of civil society generate horizontal relationships of trust and reciprocity, which can then form the basis for collective action, and contrasts these with the vertical relationships of patronage, which he sees as fostering dependence and self-interest rather than mutuality. The preference for this liberal, organizational view of civil society can be clearly seen in relation to efforts by development policy makers to promote good governance, which suggested that a “virtuous circle” could be built between state, economy, and civil society to balance growth, equity, and stability. This view has been taken up and, to some degree, reinterpreted by actors across the post-socialist states, including those in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It has been most enthusiastically embraced during the past decade by development agencies in relation to these countries, with implications for the privileging of compatible efforts and initiatives—hence, the focus on NGOs.

The second aspect pertains to dichotomies intrinsic to development and democratization frameworks. Edward Said’s Orientalism offers useful tools for understanding the implications of such conceptualizing, and particularly for embedded hierarchies: West or East, North or South, developed or developing (or underdeveloped), democratic or democratizing, civilized or uncivilized, modern or traditional and modernizing. Scholars have noted similarities between the lands of contemporary Central Asia and colonized territories elsewhere—not only in terms of relations of economic and political domination and subordination, but also by way of the writing of histories, the drawing of maps, and the distinction of certain “other”—uncivilized, pre-modern—cultures. Across Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, imaginings of “Easternness”, in opposition to the West, to Europe, or, to a lesser degree, to Russia, are prevalent; in everyday conversation, self-references to Easternness or Asianness in contrast to Western and European “civility” persist. Many research participants of this study used Easternness or Asianness to explain traditions and practices, gender roles and relations, referring broadly to Islam, large familial networks, deference to elders and authority, and patriarchal relations.

Women’s Conferences as Global “Theatres”

Importantly for women’s organizing, it should be noted that, whereas Said describes an Eastern threat conveyed through images of deviant, uncontrolled female and (feminized) homosexual male sexuality, the political threat of the Muslim world is now more commonly depicted primarily through images of strictly controlled female sexuality: “hyper-veiled” women in all-encompassing coverings. Such representations are prevalent in Western discourses, highlighting the need to emancipate submissive and passive, oppressed and victimized Eastern women. As Gayatri Spivak writes, these representations have had tangible repercussions for the international women’s movements, and for global-local relations: by way of global “theatres” like the UN Conferences on Women, the North effectively “organizes” a South or East, through discursive mechanisms and material resources, positioning participants as representatives of states within world regions. Nighat Said Khan continues, at the Beijing + 5 Review
Conference: a “unipolar world as defined by the United States and Europe, and the construction of Islam as the new ‘other’—a ‘monolithic,’ ‘barbaric’ and ‘sinister’ force replacing communism and the ‘enemy’—has been internalized by the global women’s movement.” As a result, a purportedly global movement makes peripheral a myriad of voices, with implications at multiple levels.

This leads to a third aspect, which brings into focus an understanding of identifiable world regions within globalizing gender politics. Arjun Appadurai reflects on the implications of defining regions, or areas, as such:

Much traditional thinking about “area” has been driven by conception of geographical, civilizational, and cultural coherence that rely on some list of traits—of values, languages, material practices, ecological adaptations, marriage patterns ... However sophisticated these approaches, they all tend to see “areas” as relatively immobile aggregates of traits, with more or less durable historical boundaries and with a unity composed of more or less enduring properties.

He continues, powerfully, to suggest that these assumptions have often been “telescoped backward” through the lens of contemporary US security-driven images of the world, as well as through “colonial and postcolonial conceptions of national and regional identity”.

Shared Historical Trajectory and Imagined Identity

Despite varied state regimes, religious, ethnic, linguistic, and historical links across political borders and diversity within, a bounded Central Asia—comprising the newly independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—resounds profoundly in the minds of inhabitants of the region and in the work of scholars and practitioners, isolating contexts for research and target areas for practice. This region is characterized by a common historical trajectory—pre-modernity, Soviet modernization, and post-Soviet development and democratization. International organizations, regional governments, and local civic actors actively perpetuate the notion of a coherent Central Asia. UNESCO promotes artistic events and cultural networks based on a Central Asian identity, based on the “revival” of the Great Silk Road. Educational institutions and exchange programs have taken up the Central Asian label, like the Bishkek-based American University of Central Asia. A myriad of journalistic and scholarly publications reflect on pertinent regional issues. And, international organizations have established Central Asian “headquarters” to oversee regional programs and projects, and have held seminars and conferences to promote interstate dialogue within the region on a range of themes. These initiatives collectively contribute to the imagining of a rather complex sense of “Central Asianness”. Unsurprisingly, then, the view that a distinct Central Asian “culture”—as a Volksgeist, a set of values and beliefs that makes a people distinct—is pervasive; Central Asia has been bounded, imagined, and “culturalized”, and complexly so.

These three aspects show that women’s organizing does not unfold in a vacuum, but as part of wider processes of globalizing gender politics: of targeted aid and assistance delivery, within the international system; of region-, nation- and state-building; and of reflection on and interpretation of new and old concepts and practices. These processes inculcate, create, and shape patterns of association and interaction, and inclusion and exclusion. Layers and levels of women’s organizing within and across the post-socialist
Central Asian states—including Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—have thus emerged. The following sections parse out relations among women’s organizing, considering the significance of understandings of “local”. First, I draw attention to the conceptualization of Central Asia, which has made complicated the imagining and emerging of a region-wide women’s movement. Second, the availability of and access to the material and discursive resources of globalizing gender politics pertains to processes of localization, and particularly to national contexts, within which civil societies are conceived. Relations among organizations vary accordingly. Third, globalizing gender politics privileges specific organizational forms—institutionalized NGOs—as key actors within civil societies and local women’s movements, through the provision of material and discursive resources. These organizational forms are complexly situated: their degree of integration into globalizing gender politics corresponds to their distance from “real” women on the ground. Finally, as a result of localizing processes, and the insistence on NGOs, concentrations of the resources of globalizing gender politics have formed, resulting in layers of forms of association among women.

Central Asia: A Conundrum of Women’s Movement?

The complicated nature of the conception of Central Asia—as Asian, Eastern, post-Soviet, developing, democratizing—has made problematic the formation of a region-wide women’s movement. Aspects of the imagining or conceptualizing of the region allow for the production of layers and levels among women’s organizations. Namely, in concurrence with the liberal view of civil society taken up by democracy and development initiatives, globalizing gender politics implies a rejection of the particularly Eastern aspects of Central Asianness. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, researchers have assumed that “Central Asian ‘traditions’ … would hinder the emergence of a rich civic realm in post-Soviet Central Asia”. Such assumptions inherently reinforce the region as an actually existing space: transitioning and developing, and bounded by a distinct culture. Thus, unsurprisingly, research participants noted that, as a fact of their Central Asianness, women share similar experiences and problems. Many with whom I spoke attributed not only strictly differentiated and hierarchical gender roles and relations to “being Eastern” or “Asian”, but also corruption, hospitality, and poverty. Certainly, viewing Central Asian women as second-class citizens as a fact of their Easternness is problematic; the region is also bounded by its Soviet legacies. As Lori Handrahan notes, “attempts to understand [Soviet] gender definitions through Western feminist ideals produces a bewildering situation”. The dynamic transformations of the Soviet era manifested in massive campaigns to model men and women into equal Soviet citizens, offering women in particular new rights, responsibilities, opportunities, and identities. Struggles to redefine women’s roles were strengthened and amplified by attempts at other social, political, and economic reforms implemented concurrently: nation-building, rapid urbanization, infrastructural development, industrialization, very real improvement in access to new resources, and greater visibility of Central Asian women in public life. As such, many men and women are conflicted by what has been called the “patronizing attitude of some administrators of [gender and development] programs”. They are to reject the undemocratic aspects of their Soviet past, and embrace new reforms that, to varying degrees, have not lived up to their promises.

Due to these complexities, and despite a common understanding of Central Asia and Central Asianness, it has been extremely difficult for women at the regional—that is, post-Soviet Central Asian—level to form a regional movement or even a platform.
There are logistical difficulties: expenses of travel and accommodation, complex visa regimes, and lack of coordination at the national levels. International resources, like the BPfA, CEDAW, or the MDGs, which could serve as bases for cross-country collaboration, are not well known: materials rarely move beyond the boundaries of urban centres, and are poorly disseminated or publicized. In fact, many documents are rarely translated into Russian, let alone other regional languages spoken in Central Asia. When one women’s NGO in Bishkek attempted to arrange an informal roundtable on the MDGs among colleagues, organizers were struck by the lack of Russian- or Kyrgyz-language resources accessible at the UNDP resource centre in Bishkek—not to mention the one-day limit for borrowing these resources. Regional conferences to share experiences and reflect on the status of women in these countries have been implemented by major international actors, but they tend primarily to solicit the participation of representatives of international organizations (who might be from the region), or leaders of high-profile NGOs.

There are exceptions. One has been the establishment of an informal network, based in Bishkek: the Central Asian Forum of Women’s NGOs. Largely reliant on the Internet, this network instigated a dialogue on the five Central Asian states’ experiences with the Beijing Platform for Action. Leaders of women’s NGOs from all Central Asian republics have participated in the meetings in Bishkek. Tajikistan, however, has been particularly poorly represented. Not only is it logistically difficult for Bishkek to find a NGO contact in the country, but the absence of Tajikistani partners has been, as will be discussed, expected. Generally, with few opportunities to form a region-wide movement, women NGO leaders from Central Asia have often turned to other regions of the world to which they might belong: the democratizing or transitioning states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Asia and the Pacific, or the Middle East. Reflecting on the recent Beijing Platform review meeting in New York, in February–March 2005, one research participant lamented that women from Central Asia had not arrived with a coherent stance or ideological positioning, as did representatives arriving from other, more “organized” regions of the world. In turn, Central Asian attendees ended up “receiving rather than giving”; Central Asianness has become an excuse for the lack of solidarity.

State, Nation, and Civil Society: The People and Their Places

The Kyrgyzstan Experience

It has been to the advantage of a broad spectrum of democratically-oriented NGOs, that—as pervasive as corruption may be—Kyrgyzstan has been heralded as an “Island of Democracy” by the international community. Upon independence, former President Askar Akaev’s rule allowed for a range of organizational activities, from sports clubs to religious groups, a decentralized system of local administration and governance, and a media relatively more free than in the rest of Kyrgyzstan’s post-Communist neighbouring states. International aid and assistance efforts range widely, reflecting the relative receptiveness of the state and the ease with which a myriad of organizations have been able to access and organize local groups and assert the now-fashionable “good governance” agenda. As evident in the flurry of NGO activity surrounding the popular overthrow of the government in March 2005, many of these organizations have become quite political, in the name of civil society and democracy. The opposition—a loose coalition of diverse civic organizations and political
parties—took up with great pride the notion of “the people”. Democratically-oriented, civil society as a whole is seen as a space where “the people” articulate their needs and goals to the state.

The notion of “the people” is facilitated by a cautious discussion on diversity and ethnic relations in the country, facilitated by efforts to create a Kyrgyzstani and/or Kyrgyz national identity, implicitly drawing from Western and Soviet theorizing on nation and ethnicity. Attempts have been made to reconceptualize post-Soviet citizenship, to define the nation as multiethnic and diverse, on the homeland of ethnic Kyrgyz, in recognition of at least three large ethnic groups (Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian) and over 75 or so other smaller ethnic groups (natsii) residing in the country. In 1994, former President Askar Akaev launched the slogan, “Kyrgyzstan, Our Common Home”, in part to stifle interethnic tensions, and also to halt the massive migration of Russian-speakers (Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, and many others) from the south to the north of the country, and emigration to Russia and beyond. Though itself largely symbolic, this slogan has been paralleled by a host of initiatives, many of which are driven by non-governmental organizations. The Assembly of Peoples of Kyrgyzstan, and a multitude of local and state-level (ethno-)national cultural centres, strive to promote the visibility of and communication among ethno-national groups, and even to reinterpret civil society, sensitive to local understandings of nation, ethnicity, and other forms of affiliation. By emphasizing diversity as a national resource, such initiatives implicitly make a myriad of discursive resources available for women, with which to reevaluate the implications of their gendered roles in multiple communities—as citizens, members of sub-ethnic and ethnic groups, inhabitants of particular territories, and so on.

Such discussions have involved, concurrently, a turn to the “roots” of ethnic groups. Within Kyrgyzstan, ethnic Kyrgyz, who comprise approximately 65% of the population, are a rather cohesive group; despite regional variations and tribes, they are united by strong sense of identity and related nomadic tribes. Imagining the Kyrgyz ethnos in terms of nomadism has been accompanied by assumptions of limited gender segregation, reduced religious influence, and a more active role for women in public as well as private life, as compared to that in many other sizeable, neighbouring Muslim ethnic groups. It is thus argued that the Kyrgyz are inherently less Eastern, more tolerant, and prone to democratization; Kyrgyz women are emancipated and visible in public life. At the Fourth World Conference on Women, Roza Otunbaeva, then Foreign Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic, praised her “people”:

And today, in search of our “ego”, our self-identity as a nation, when some try to lead us astray to the unknown ways we state firmly: not one of our women-predecessors ever covered her face or let the husband beat her. We will not allow this [to] happen now, one thousand years later!

Largely as a fact of this imagining of “the people” and romanticizing its history, and particularly in and around Bishkek, the notion of a democratically-oriented women’s movement of Kyrgyzstan is gaining force. Yet, in light of processes of ethnic consolidation, layers of “the people” can be discerned, even within the notion of this movement. One female research participant used nomadism to explain differences among civic organizations spearheaded by Kyrgyz women, versus those headed by Russians: Russian women have a motherland (Russia) to aspire to, whereas Kyrgyz women have nomadism “in their blood”, she has claimed. Organizations led by Kyrgyz women were cited as being less focused; it is less clear toward what these organizations aim. Here, Eastern or Asian Kyrgyzness is opposed to ethnic Russianness, the latter of which is, in essence, oriented
more toward the West than the East. Meanwhile, oppositions are used to explain regional variations: as a fact of tangible Uzbek presence and influence, the south of the country (which housed a large population of ethnic Uzbeks as well) is perceived as Eastern, traditional and patriarchal, and more socially and religiously conservative than the Russified north. While the Kyrgyz ethnos is seen as inherently democratically-oriented, failures of civic organizations to achieve tangible democratic change are attributed to its Eastern qualities. Such rhetoric is prevalent in daily discussions of national disunity and regional and ethnic variations. Finally, this rhetoric carries assumptions about gender roles and relations, and thus forms the backdrop for many of the biases of well-established, elite, urban NGOs.

The Tajikistan Struggle

In Tajikistan, a range of organizations also exists, but their interactions in a democratically-oriented space understood as civil society differs significantly from those in Kyrgyzstan. Much more so than Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan has struggled to imagine a cohesive identity; before the Soviet period, “Tajik”, including other ethnic groups which were assigned titular republics, was not a nationality in and of itself, though the use of the Tajik language, a close variant of Persian was widespread in the region, with classic Persian having been the language of the court, sciences, and the arts in the ancient cities of Samarqand and Bukhara, both of which due to Stalinist cartography have wound up in Uzbekistan, instead. As a result, it has been much more challenging for the Tajik state to encourage the population as a whole to think of themselves as a national unit—a situation that led in part to the vicious civil war in which regional interests trumped ethno-regional and ideological labels. That said, as Kelly McMann suggests: “Whereas national leaders in Kyrgyzstan chose to create a more permissible NGO environment, officials in Tajikistan were too busy fighting the [civil] war to try to control it.”

As a whole, Tajikistan has been characterized as “conflict prone”, as a strategic focus of the persistent “great game” in geopolitics, in particular need of “management”. Tajikistan, along with the Ferghana Valley, which it shares with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, has up until recently been effectively defined—and localized—by its conflict potential and labelled as a “breeding ground” for renegade groups, religious fundamentalism, and interethnic tensions. Local, technical development initiatives—engineered as “quick fixes” to poverty and conflict, for instance—have been privileged over efforts to confront contentious social and political development issues. To a large degree, national, open, public discourse about the civil war in Tajikistan has yet to emerge, and serious efforts to facilitate such a discourse are minimal. This limits spaces for theorizing on civil society, gender, and other facets of social identity within the country.

The war and conflict potential of the country has been used as an excuse for importunate poverty and the government’s regular crackdown on “dissent”. Poverty is evident, and much of the population remains at least partially dependent on international food aid—a 2003 World Bank survey established that around two-thirds of Tajikistan’s population lives under the poverty threshold, although it also suggested that poverty is slowly on the decline. The economy still reflects its Soviet past, with significant state intervention, but very little in the way of the rule of law. Corruption is rampant; foreign investors are rare. One exception was the signing of a preliminary agreement in 2004 for up to $2 billion of investment by Russian metals and energy conglomerates. Still, cleavages persist, enhanced by availability and access to resources; sub-ethnic, regional, and religious
affiliations; and an extremely rugged landscape; entire regions, like the Badakhshan Province, are very much isolated from Dushanbe. Within this milieu, Western development and democratization organizations tend to tow the official state line, which portrays the President as the sole guarantor of stability. The government is adept at using this argument when international organizations push for faster change, arguing that the priority is stability, and human rights and democratization must be postponed until that is assured. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN, among others, have been somewhat muted in their criticisms of the regime and have often directed their activities into less confrontational arenas, such as technical support. Though many privately acknowledge the government’s spotty record on human rights and political and economic reform, there is little inclination to push for deep changes. (Some positive moves have been made, however: in 2005, for example, the Tajik Parliament, mimicking similar laws passed by Russia and many other CIS countries, did make the death penalty unlawful, though the treatment of those accused and in prison does not satisfy international standards. The Parliament has also established stiff penalties against human trafficking.)

Efforts of major international organizations in turn have had significant implications for the resources made available to women, and to the creation (and closing) of spaces for women’s organizing in Tajikistan. First, it should be noted again that bottom-up development and democratization efforts have focused more on addressing technical, rather than social and political issues—such as through localized reconstruction and infrastructure rebuilding initiatives. (The situation is significantly different for Kyrgyzstan, where resources have been made available to cover a much wider spectrum of development and promote democracy.) This is related to donor-driven pressures to achieve quick-impact, non-confrontational results with some evidence of the participation of local people, as well as demands by people for the vast amounts of post-conflict aid they have heard about to reach them sooner rather than later. As a result, little analysis is made of interrelated facets of social identity, affecting gender roles and relations in society. Second, the good governance agenda has privileged the “revival” of traditional modes of informal community association, such as through mahalla councils—councils of citizens, which provide a space for normally male, but also female, heads of households to discuss and address local problems and conflicts—as a presumably non-confrontational means of bottom-up development and democratization. Beguilingly, many women on one hand have been offered trainings and seminars on civic and political participation; on the other, they have been effectively excluded from critical areas of local decision-making, in the name of respecting local tradition and culture. Third, country reports and project assessments are rife with references to “Tajik women” as a unitary subject, i.e. as beneficiaries of aid and assistance, and as passive victims of Tajikistan’s traumatic civil war. Assumptions of the post-conflict strife of these (culturalized) women are pervasive in everyday conversation as well: that Tajikistan is too unstable and burdened by tradition to consider seriously possibilities for vibrant women’s organizing.

As a result, when women in Tajikistan have shown little inclination to join in public activism, their passivity is taken as a mark of Easternness. In the face of political, economic and social upheavals in recent years, there is an almost maniacal insistence on the need to preserve stability within the boundaries of the country. Shirin Akiner therefore suggests that women’s “passivity” could be interpreted as a sophisticated coping strategy, to protect central values of society in a time of fluctuation and stress—and thus a crucial contribution to community life which is fundamental to maintaining continuity and
identity. I would suggest that this passivity is also taken for granted. It is an assumption about women in the country, dismissive of the possibilities of their activities, and uncritical of the diverse factors affecting gender roles and relations. More importantly, the need to preserve stability is not mere political rhetoric. Rather, it is a constantly recurring theme in private as well as public discussion, essentially legitimized by Western aid and assistance organizations, allowing for condemnation and exclusion of all perceived as destabilizing-agencies and forces.

NGOs: Interactions and Interrelations

Diverse forms of organizing and activism, of which NGOs are part, have proliferated across the former Soviet bloc. The growth of civil society in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as in other developing or democratizing contexts, has been attributed largely to the assistance of Western organizations. As the “new policy agenda” took root during the 1990s, stressing good governance on the one hand and neo-liberal economic policies on the other, NGOs came to be viewed as a means of circumventing cumbersome state structures; as an alternative or substitute service provider in the sectors of health, education, and agriculture; and sometimes as part of national privatization policy. Some NGOs see their role in providing services and offering support where impoverished governments or economic actors fail; some act as representative bodies for interest or social groups; some focus on developing and disseminating informational resources. Particularly in Kyrgyzstan, a myriad of civic groups have been funded extensively; efforts to build their organizational capacity as institutionalized mechanisms for “voicing” local claims have been made; and political roles have been widened and encouraged.

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan alike, NGOs have implemented a host of women- and gender-centred projects covering various areas: land reform, political participation, business and economic support, the media, health, education reform, and human rights, among other things. Some NGOs have emerged around specific needs—such as a group to support women living in slums on the outskirts of Bishkek, or an association to lobby for the interests of disabled women. Other NGOs cohered at the initiative of active women, who saw broad problems in their communities, and simply desired to help. Particularly adventurous initiatives implemented by NGOs, with financial assistance from international donors, in Kyrgyzstan include a “gender school” for local officials and leaders, spearheaded by the Women’s Support Center; and an educational summer school covering interaction among gender, ethnicity, and other facets of social identity, organized by a mixed team of local and international organizations and scholars. In Tajikistan, the OSCE, with assistance from local trainers, has implemented seminars on gender and Islam, challenging thinking about norms and traditions within communities. Hundreds of women’s NGOs alone are registered and function in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, taking on the task of supporting and representing local women.

Many researchers have questioned the capacities of these ubiquitous organizations, arguing that more often than not, in attempting to garner funding, domestic NGOs ultimately strive toward “issues that Western donors found important, but rarely around issues that locals confronted on a daily basis”. In the context of economic hardship, for example, many NGOs have taken up the language of “mainstreaming”, “mission statements”, “target groups”, “trainings”, “coffee breaks” and so forth; they take great care indeed to seek out and speak to the whims of donors, and to position themselves strategically for highly competitive funding. As a result, researchers have noted the “quandary of aid recipients who become so dependent on international assistance that...
they become ‘ghettoized,’ more responsive to international donors than to the local concerns of the groups they claim to represent’. Based on evidence primarily from Western NGO support organizations, Fiona Adamson argues: “local NGOs receive almost 100 percent of their funds from international actors, and can easily become almost 100 percent donor-driven”.

Sonia Alvarez comments on the problematic insistence on NGOs as actors within independent states, for women in particular:

[The financial relationship of NGOs to States and donors] may undermine NGOs’ ability to pursue more process-oriented forms of feminist cultural-political intervention—such as conscious-raising, popular education, or other strategies aimed at transforming those gender power relations manifest in the realm of public discourse, culture, and daily life—forms of gendered injustice that defy gender planning quick fixes.

In general, these processes have been referred to as the “NGO-ization of women’s movements, in reference to this new set of institutionalized, (allegedly apolitical) professional advocacy actors, pervasive in developing and democratizing contexts alike. This is particularly troublesome if NGOs are to be representative of their communities, and even—at a global level—to represent local through contributions to international conferences and conventions.

I thus turn to the emergence of layers of women’s organizing, within the milieu of globalizing gender politics. Like Kelly McMann, I do not see a straightforward relationship between donor and local NGOs in and across Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Whereas Adamson suggests that many NGOs cease to exist once donor funding has stopped, based on my fieldwork, I have found that many organizations have persisted for many years, some without ever having received a single grant. Many women leaders in fact support their organizations through private businesses—trading in bazaars, for example, sometimes relying on clan or family connections, sometimes not. They then offer and participate in NGO-related work (such as consultations and trainings) when time and resources allow. Through economic activities, women form informal support networks of buyers and sellers.

Here, a complicated situation arises: first, successful NGOs are commended for their degree of “Westernness”. These organizations are “free”, unburdened by culture, kinship ties or other “uncivil” means or forms of affiliation, and relied upon to disseminate resources and knowledge. Yet, assuming Easternness, many attribute organizations’ achievements and partnerships to clan linkages—among NGOs, donor organizations, and state structures. In fact, NGOs that regularly receive basic grants and support from donors are not universally respected among women’s organizations. Increasingly, an emerging, elite core of well-established urban leaders of women’s NGOs in many ways displays the same “patronizing attitude” suggested as characteristic of administrators of gender programs. Finally, while support for individual NGOs through trade or economic activities provides numerous benefits to women, such as participation in informal support networks, in discussions with NGO participants, such endeavours are only mentioned with reluctance—and largely as a fact of the low status granted to small trade, the perceived Easternness of work in bazaars (as improper, since traditionally the market has been the prevue of males), and the prominence of familial support in these activities.

Thus, what I see emerging is more complex than a simple relationship between donors and NGOs: it is a relationship that is multilayered and multilevelled, rife with hierarchies and exclusions. A plurality of women’s organizations exists across these countries, some
intimately integrated into the material and discursive resources of globalizing gender politics, some connected through network organizations, and others completely excluded. NGOs of mothers of soldiers, of scientists, entrepreneurs, and artists, crisis centres and shelters providing psychological consultations and legal assistance, associations of informal traders, picketers, and protesters, all reflect how significantly gender influences the ways in which women experience and think about their roles and positioning as members in multiple communities.

The Organizational Landscape: Inclusion and Exclusion

In both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, a handful of core, elite organizations has emerged. Compared to the bulk of women’s NGOs, and certainly to women in general, they wield exceptional knowledge of global platforms like CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action, often using these documents in their own work. Many leaders of prominent NGOs have travelled abroad to participate in international trainings and conferences; most speak English, and are former (if not current) academics. Most use Russian as a working language, rather than local languages. These organizations, most prevalent in Bishkek and Dushanbe, thrive off of the economic and political power concentrated in urban centres, where international organizations maintain headquarters, formulate projects, and enjoy relative logistical ease. In both countries, urban women are generally considered more empowered and “emancipated” than their counterparts in rural areas; this status is often attributed to the degree of “Russification” (or Sovietization), or the lack of Easternness (in opposition to Westernness).

The emergence of such a core group of organizations is particularly evident in Kyrgyzstan. Over the last 15 years, with support from donors, women’s organizations have flourished—quantitatively, if not also qualitatively. This encouraged the early development of elite urban NGOs, connected to donors and international organizations; their mission statements are broad, and refer to developing and distributing information materials, and offering trainings and seminars on NGO capacity-building and women’s leadership. Many are centre points for complexly interconnected, competitive, centralized networks; some work regularly with and have been repeatedly funded by international organizations. The prominent NGO Diamond of Kyrgyzstan, for instance, has worked closely with UNIFEM and UNDP; Bishkek’s Agency for Social Technologies is essentially a spin-off of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Germany); and the Women Can Do Everything Network of Kyrgyzstan was effectively organized by the OSCE.

In Kyrgyzstan in particular, these networks are the defining feature of women’s NGOs. A handful of prominent organizations in Bishkek have existed for over a decade, know the local and global gender landscape well, and have asserted considerable authority (autonomous from donors) over issues to address and actions to take. They thus serve as centre points for networks, which often overlap; it is not clear for many, and even for those within these NGO networks, who assists whom, and how partnerships are forged, and how resources are shuffled and disseminated. As a result, one research participant reported, “NGOs are starting to look like donors: bureaucratic, and not transparent”. Indeed, despite the wealth of gender-related resources available, very little information has “trickled down” to women’s groups as a whole. Few women’s organizations (let alone women, in general) outside of Bishkek know of the BPfA, CEDAW, or the MDGs; to a large degree, these circulate only among core NGOs, the local elite, donors, and—to a lesser degree—state ministries. Many resources—even country-specific—are only available in English. As one research participant suggested, BPfA,
CEDAW, or the MDGs are not useful to “real” women; rather, they are resources to facilitate the de facto inclusion of a select few into the international community.

Hierarchy among organizations is thus tangible. To illustrate, NGOs, as well as a handful of representatives from the government and international organizations, from across Kyrgyzstan convened at a National Women’s Forum, held in Bishkek in early April 2005. Leaders of core organizations in Bishkek intensively planned the Forum, inviting their network members and hammering out a solid focus and mission. Participants then convened for two days to discuss women’s role in the “stabilization” process, following the overthrow of the government in late March 2005. They developed a concrete “United Platform for Action” to submit to a subsequent general civic forum and to the government, and to outline goals and steps to reach these goals; they also organized a working group to follow through on the Platform.

Many participants left the April Forum energized, hoping for new collaborative efforts and opportunities. The working group corresponded regularly, convening to present the acting President of the country with the Platform of the women’s movement, to develop concrete suggestions for the revision of the Constitution, and to nominate an expert under the President to advise the government on gender-related matters. That said, this group comprises solely of a handful of core women’s NGOs of Bishkek—mostly those who had planned the Forum in the first place and who were integrated into globalizing gender politics. One research participant, wondering about the working group’s activities, conceded: “We just assume that the smart women in the capital know what they’re doing.” In fact, these organizations, through their proximity to international organizations, donors, and the central government, and through maintenance of extensive NGO networks, wield significant control over the dissemination of material and discursive resources. Cooperation within this group ultimately gave way to bickering. NGO leaders sought to position themselves strategically within new donor and government alliances, rallied network members to support them, and withheld pertinent information from possible partners. In effect, what began as a tangible opportunity for cohesion and collaboration was dashed by the interests and ambitions of a handful of core, Bishkek-based NGOs.

The activities of and relations among core women’s NGOs reverberate through the country. The core’s “responsibility” to disseminate knowledge, aid and assistance is both expected, and contested. One participant at the Forum returned from Bishkek to her community in the south of the country, and was immediately asked what the Forum would give women. She was told that women of the south made the revolution; and was asked what they would be given in return, from the “elite” women who seemed to have usurped their voices. Indeed, the Forum was viewed as an elite affair of core women’s organizations discussing the same issues they always discuss, ignoring the voices of “real” women, and involving women who had not participated in recent political changes. Despite its instance on the role of the women’s movement in the stabilization process, the Forum actually excluded a host of women who had been active in the March 2005 events as gendered citizens, but who were not affiliated necessarily with any NGOs. This has been a common criticism of women’s organizations in general, and of women’s organizations in Bishkek in particular: these organizations are not representative of “real” women; rather, they work for their own interests. Among women’s organizations, the core NGOs in Bishkek, which participate regularly in international conferences and work with global documents like the BPfA, are seen as elite, impractical, and distant from and uncommitted to the everyday lives of women and their households in Kyrgyzstan.
To illustrate these tensions, women organized their communities to protest irregularities in the highly contentious Parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, which took place in February 2005; they ultimately played a significant role in garnering support for the overthrow of the Akaev government in March. Throughout the spring of 2005, women—and particularly economically and politically disenfranchised women, from the south and rural areas—took to the streets regarding a myriad of issues, from the constitutional court to land reform. Aside portrayals in the media of rowdy women flooding public spaces, I was told of women playing a vital role in maintaining order during the height of protesting, by procuring resources, organizing regular cleanings of public spaces and even the administration buildings they had overrun, and caring for fellow protestors. Yet, without a formalized, organizational structure, operating within the framework of globalizing gender politics, the contribution of these women remained largely disregarded. Thus, rather than including female-protestors in discussions at the National Forum, core NGOs maintained, for instance, an elite—and distant—role. Despite taking up the language of a national women’s movement, this core of women has allowed for a significant degree of exclusivity and neglect of women not affiliated with NGOs.

The North–South Divide

Considering the diversity of factors affecting gender roles in the country, it appears as though there is a disjuncture between core NGOs, integrated in globalizing gender politics, and less (or non-)integrated women’s organizations across the country. Women’s NGOs outside of Bishkek differ in many ways from core NGOs. One research participant suggested that the former tend to be more active, in that their distance from international organizations has led to more freedom. If a criticism of NGOs is their dependence on international aid and assistance, and particularly on funding, I found organizations particularly in and around Kyrgyzstan’s cities of Osh and Jalalabad—where many of the social, political, and economic ills fostering the revolutionary fervour were most felt—to be rather autonomous, diverse, and active. Furthermore, uncritical biases about “the south” (as opposed to the north) also carry assumptions of gender roles and relations, and of women’s organizing; these areas are seen as more unstable, Eastern, traditional, and Muslim, with southern women known to be more passive and burdened by tradition. As a result, many core women’s NGO leaders attributed southern women’s prominence preceding and following the March events to men’s manipulation: women were “used” by male relatives and community members during protests; women could thus “get away with more”; it was assumed. Still, in my research I found that the belief that southern women in particular—presumably more traditional, and less empowered and gender-savvy than their counterparts in the north—could be acting on their own volition—was rare. Another common response identified women-protestors as poor, lacking education, and generally unorganized, taking up undignified means of political protest. On the contrary, a women NGO leader from Jalalabad praised these women not only for mobilizing their communities, but also for maintaining order, cleaning the centre of town during the height of picketing, establishing rules of etiquette, and procuring food and other supplies for protestors.

Similar rural–urban, centre–periphery and inter-regional relations and disparities exist in Tajikistan, which translate into assumptions about gender roles and relations. To illustrate, flexible gender relations within the Badakhshan Province, inhabited largely by Ismaili Muslims, were regularly attributed to the region’s “modernity” and
“civility”, in contrast to the more characteristically “Eastern” majority of the country. But in general, relations among organizations of women in Tajikistan are quite different from those in Kyrgyzstan. Over the past several years, women’s organizations, with support from international actors, have been highly successful in implementing civic education and women’s rights projects at the community level. A handful of prominent Tajik NGOs work on violence against women (through information campaigns, consultations, and opening of crisis centres), women’s political participation (through trainings and seminars), or enhancing women’s economic role (through courses and credit union). Informal associations and networks of craft-makers and traders are ubiquitous in Tajikistan, some of which recently have been granted support from donors; they have also figured prominently in recent schemes to promote eco-tourism in mountainous regions of Badakhshan Province through agencies like the Aga Khan Development Network.

Across Tajikistan, however, NGOs tend to exist in isolation from one another, often directly organized by, or striving toward, international organizations and donors. Unlike Kyrgyzstan, multiple extensive and coordinated networks of NGOs do not exist, despite the occasional collaborative efforts: to pressure the government to re-introduce a quota for women in elected bodies, for instance, or to a “National Plan of Action” to increase the status of and role of women (1998-2005), with NGOs serving as implementing partners. One exception is the WID Bureau, a network of 54 women and gender-related NGOs, based in Dushanbe, which is active regionally and internationally. Considering the myriad of context-specific factors affecting women’s lives, and the lack of a discourse that recognizes and respects diversity at the national level, and the limited resources made available to bridge such a subject, it is difficult to assess in what ways this network has been able to contribute to local theorizing on gender. For instance, leaders of many women’s organizations argue that the participation of women in political, economic and social life would contribute to national stability if the traditional mentality could be transformed. Consequently, most projects conducted by women’s organizations aim to raise women’s social status—rather than to challenge the notion of “tradition” itself; as a result, in the eyes of some observers, the notion of the “victimized” Tajik woman remains intact in Tajikistan.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to shed light on the multifarious factors affecting relations among local women’s organizing, in the milieu of globalizing gender politics, in and across the two Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Shifts within globalizing gender politics have had complex implications for local women and local women’s organizing across these states. Across the board, and despite calls to heed to voices of diverse women, many of the hierarchies, pretensions, and exclusions condemned at the global level in effect repeat at the “local”. Reasons for this, I suggest, are multiple and interrelated; they can be parsed out and articulated.

First, globalizing gender politics has uncritically taken up gender—minimizing its value as a tool for understanding diverse factors, which affect relations among men and women as members of communities. At the same time, an uncritical globalizing of gender politics has lost its reasoning as to why a focus on women could be of importance. Rather than altering the material or structural bases of patriarchal and hierarchical relations, uncritical gender programming works with more neutral concepts of equality and understanding between men and women. In Tajikistan, this has effectively allowed for the support of traditional practices, thus to some extent abetting the exclusion of women in much of
the critical decision making of government and the market. Second, emphasis on the liberal notion of civil society within development and democratization frameworks, prominent in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, has sidelined multifarious forms of organizing, such as the traditional and informal mahalla network, which are far more “grassroots” than many modern and formal NGOs, and offer women a myriad of benefits. Third, the promotion of NGOs has forced elitism, hierarchies, and exclusions among organizations, as a result of the controlled dissemination of materials and discursive resources. This is particularly true in Kyrgyzstan, with the emergence of centralized NGO networks. Finally, globalizing gender politics has contributed to processes of “localization”, as a result of assumptions about groups and territories—or target communities and areas. The existence of a culture is often taken for granted. Efforts made on behalf of globalizing gender politics also carry assumptions about progress toward pre-given—often Western ideal—ends, and are thus hierarchical and can be ethnocentric. In Tajikistan, for instance, targeted aid and assistance efforts present barriers to women’s ability to create a space for diverse organizing, to cooperation among women’s organizations, and to the formation of a sense of movement. This has even affected the participation of women from Tajikistan in women’s organizing at the Central Asian regional level.

In practice, shifts to gender and to local have shoved opportunities for exploring the possible importance of women-solidarity across borders and barriers, essential for tangible improvements in the lives of diverse women, to the background. In this context, I suggest that a more critical use of gender as a lens for understanding the interrelations of facets of social identity would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of relations among women’s organizing, within often overlapping, interrelated contexts. Indeed, it is important to conceptualize “local” women not as a homogenous group, and the movements they comprise not as static, either on the national level or from an international or global perspective. Women’s movements must be viewed as processes, as pluralities of women and men consisting of and encompassing diversity and differences between class, ethnicity, and other distinctions.

On this note, reconsidering the notion of civil society, and encouraging diverse theorizing on the concept, would open space for new partnerships and possibilities for inclusion. Jenny White, for one, advocates broadening the concept to reflect the long-term potential of forms of activism that are often ignored in mainstream, NGO-focused analyses. Doing so would shed light on the significance to economic, political, and social change of informal associations such as the mahalla—entities that are based on neighbourly support and gendered identities as citizens, mothers, or wives.

Simply put, globalizing gender politics contributes to processes of localizing. It would be to the benefit of women—and men—in Central Asia and worldwide, to consider the implications of these processes, as well as how local is conceived, and by whom, and how layers of local affect relations among women. Not only does the availability of and access to global material and discursive resources relate to assumptions and expectations about localities or target areas—and even about the perceived existence of such spaces—but this availability and access also contribute to hierarchies in the maintenance of these localities. As a result, the degree to which an organization is integrated into globalizing gender politics in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan corresponds to its participation in the reproduction of hierarchies and exclusions condemned at the global level, and at the local level. This is true, despite the recent focus of international, intra-national, and global women’s activism to deconstruct relations of power, and to spread material and discursive resources more equally, worldwide.
NOTES

1. This paper in its original version was presented at the “2005 Middle East and Central Asia Politics, Economics, and Society Conference”, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA, 8–10 September 2005.


9. In recent practice, the shift to gender is being realized through mainstreaming. Formerly, activities that focused solely on women (rather than gender) tended to be marginalized within the bureaucracies of international aid and assistance agencies, as well as government structures; women’s access to resources and power remained minimal. Awareness of these constraints led to the integration strategy, which attempted to address this marginalization by incorporating “women’s perspectives” into policy development and project design and implementation. Yet, these perspectives were still seen as “add-ons”, typically incorporated at late stages of planning processes, when major decisions had been made and little real impact could be achieved. Now, in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, international organizations (such as the United Nations Development Program and the World Bank) are in the process of mainstreaming gender across virtually all efforts, spreading resources from activities or offices that previously focused solely on women. Gender mainstreaming was defined by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) agreed conclusions 1997/2 as: “... the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.” See Kathleen Staudt, Women, Foreign Assistance, and Advocacy Administration, New York: Praeger, 1985; Maxine Molyneaux, “Mobilization without emancipation? Women’s interests, the state, and revolution in Nicaragua”, Feminist Studies, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1985, pp. 227–254; V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan: Global Gender Issues, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999; Naiia Kabeer, Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought, London: Verso, 1994; Kathleen Staudt, ed., Women, International Development, and Politics, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997; Anne Goetz, “Introduction: Getting institutions right for women in development”, in Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development, ed. Anne Goetz, London: Zed, 1997, pp. 1–28.


20. These beliefs are premised on the idea that civil society can balance the state and the market in political terms by reducing the abuse of power, and in economic terms by becoming a third source of social service provision. While such ideas may resonate in industrialized liberal democracies—although even here are hotly debated—they may have limited value in countries where the state itself remains weak and limited in basic capacity.


36. In Kyrgyzstan, political parties are often understood as part of civil society. For more information, see McMann, “The civic realm in Kyrgyzstan”, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

37. “The People” became a slogan of the March events and was most visible in the responses of shop owners to post-coup rioting and looting: signs declaring “we are with the people” across store windows, in Kyrgyz and Russian (Biz El Menen and My S Narodom).

38. A massive Civil Society National Forum was organized in Bishkek in April 2005, after the overthrow of the government, at which participants developed an appeal to the government about pertinent issues assessed and addressed by civic actors. Members of the interim administration and Parliamentarians attended; this was heralded as a new era in cooperation between the government and the people.
39. The Institute for Ethnic Policy, for instance, published a periodical on ethnic issues in Kyrgyzstan, drawing from Western and Soviet scholarship and media; the Soros Foundation’s Ethnic Development Program, with the support of a team of local experts, strives to promote positive interethnic relations, theorizing on the notion of ethnic diversity as a national resource.


41. Economic and political disparities, such as the historical concentration of economic and political resources in and around Bishkek, could also be used to explain differences, yet such analysis is not as prevalent in everyday conversation. If such disparities are acknowledged, they are more often linked to nepotism and other “facts” of Easternness.


43. McMann, “The civic realm in Kyrgyzstan”, op. cit., p. 245.


48. Ibid., p. 16.


51. In a survey carried out by the non-government organization Traditions and the Modern World, more than half the women interviewed said they would like to run for local councils; around 12% believed they would have no chance of being elected. Of those surveyed, 23% expressed doubt that they could get support from voters.


56. See Mendelson and Glenn, The Power and Limits of NGOs, op. cit.; Kuehnast and Nechemias, Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition, op. cit.

57. Mendelson and Glenn, The Power and Limits of NGOs, op. cit., pp. 10 and 4.


64. Interview, 17 June 2005. NGO Leader from Osh Oblast’, Kyrgyzstan.

65. Political and economic power have for long been concentrated in the north of the country and, recently, particularly among members of the (former President) Akaev clan. Tensions leading to
the March events have thus been attributed to the disenfranchisement of southern territories from decision making, and to economic disparities between northern and southern regions. See International Crisis Group (ICG), “Kyrgyzstan: after the revolution”, Asia Report, No. 97, 4 May 2005, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.


67. To illustrate: three NGOs—Women’s Voices, Orzu (Hope), and Oshtii Milly (National Reconciliation)—have worked with the OSCE to arrange seminars on civic education, focusing on gender, culture, the role of political parties in democratizing society, and the role of the local government. Open Asia (a branch of a Paris-based NGO) has held a series of seminars on violence against women in Tajikistan; a roundtable discussion on women and elections; and has developed three training modules on human rights. Another NGO, Traditions and Modernity, has conducted advocacy training workshops for the leaders of women’s and human rights NGOs in August 1998. It also initiated a project on women and political leadership, offering training seminars in different regions for local NGO leaders, journalists, and high school and university teachers, and for women running in Parliamentary elections and participating as election observers.


70. The problem is not inherent in the shift from women to gender, I would argue, but the persistent uncritical “use” of the latter in a range of practical inventions. For instance, through gender mainstreaming, resources allocated for women have been diffused throughout the bureaucracies of international agencies, to engender development practice rather than to promote partnerships among women and women’s organizations. See note 8. See also von Braunmuhl, “Mainstreaming gender”, op. cit.


72. White, “Civic culture and Islam in urban Turkey”, op. cit.
People in Exile: The Oral History of Meskhetian Turks (Akhyskha Turkleri)\textsuperscript{1}

MALIKA MIRKHANOVA

Abstract

This paper examines the plight of the Meskhetian Turks (Akhyskha Turkleri) originally from Georgia, who subsequently relocated to Central Asia by order of Stalin, later migrated to Russia just prior to the break-up of the USSR, and in the post-Soviet era, a sizeable population immigrated to the United States. After researching the subject and conducting interviews with a number of Meskhetian Turks residing in the US coming from various professional and socio-economic backgrounds, my findings suggest that the most prominent feature of these people is their multiple, non-voluntary relocations and experience of discrimination by host populations everywhere. Indeed, like most other minorities persecuted by majority rule worldwide, the hardships of the Meskhetian Turks are derived from social and political conditions not of their making—it is as though they have been the pawns in a world shaped largely by local and international political agendas. This paper examines the origins of Meskhetian Turks; their various deportations; the hardships that they and their predecessors endured under Stalin’s administration and the Ferghana Pogrom of 1989; their successive persecution in Krasnodar, Russia; and their current life in the United States.

Introduction

The Meskhetian Turks are Turkish in origin and have been given a Meskhetian prefix due to the region they originate from, Meskhetia, which is an area in southern Georgia that shares a border with Turkey. They were forcibly deported to Central Asia in 1944 by order of Joseph Stalin and resettled in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. In May 1989, a pogrom against Meskhetian Turks occurred in Uzbekistan’s territorial share of the Ferghana Valley—a resource-rich and densely populated area in Central Asia shared between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The reasons behind this push are still unknown, but likely related to local inter-ethnic animosities and competition over natural resources, which generated a massive evacuation of Meskhetian Turks from Uzbekistan. The majority of Meskhetian Turks were then resettled in the Krasnodar region of Southern Russia, on a territory adjoining the Kuban River. Some managed to settle in Azerbaijan, and a few in Turkey. Ethnic tensions, followed by conflicts, violence, and even the murder of many Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar led to the creation of the Involuntary Resettlement Refugee Program of the United States Government in 2004, where the USA accepted applications from over 10,000 Meskhetian Turks under the said refugee resettlement scheme.\textsuperscript{2} Many of the Meskhetian Turks in the US have settled in and around the city of Philadelphia, while others have come to St Louis, Missouri, and a few households have even settled in Salt Lake City, Utah.

\textsuperscript{1} People in Exile: The Oral History of Meskhetian Turks (Akhyskha Turkleri)

\textsuperscript{2} Many of the Meskhetian Turks in the US have settled in and around the city of Philadelphia, while others have come to St Louis, Missouri, and a few households have even settled in Salt Lake City, Utah.
This paper presents the recollections of the dislocations and hardships as reported to me via interviews with selected members of the Meskhetian Turks who have settled in St Louis. My acquaintance with these ethnic Meskhetian Turks occurred at the International Institute of Metropolitan Saint Louis, a refugee resettlement agency, where I was a case worker for refugees. Several members of this community graciously offered me their time, and in many instances I had the opportunity to speak with them in depth. As far as can be determined, they were candid in recounting their life experiences and reflecting on the several periods of their resettlement. The interviews were mainly conducted in Russian, but also in Turkish. I offered my interviewees to choose the setting for the interview, and sometimes they invited other relatives to join in the conversation; in some cases I met with my interviewee alone.

In this paper, I will outline the major developments in their history and quote from some of their statements in order to record what these events meant to them. The interviewees whose statements are presented in this paper include:

- Alim (51), who is married and has four children. He originally was manager of a group of government grocery stores in Uzbekistan, prior to relocating to Krasnodar, Russia, where he became a farmer.
- Raziya (39), was also a farmer in Russia. In Uzbekistan she worked as an accountant. She currently works at a factory in St Louis. Raziya's husband, Ilyas (41), claims that due to the requirement of having to serve in the Soviet Army he had to forfeit his chance to attend an institution of higher learning. Raziya and Ilyas have two children.
- Leila (45), who worked as an education specialist in Uzbekistan. In Russia, she mainly assisted her husband in selling vegetables in the market. She has one daughter.
- Hamida (42), who worked in the market selling fruits and vegetables in Krasnodar while her husband Beinali (47) and their two sons, aged 19 and 21, worked on an agricultural plot of land that the family had rented from the local Russian population.

Origins of the Meskhetian Turks

Meskhetian Turks come from Meskheti-Dzhavakheti, a south-western region of Georgia. Despite the fact that they are labelled as Meskhetians, most prefer to be called Akhiskha Turks, from Akhaltsikhsk, a main town in Meskheti-Dzhavakheti, south-western Georgia. Some regard the Meskhetian Turks as “renounced Georgians” (that is, they are said to have originally been ethnic Georgians of the Christian faith who had converted to Islam); others consider them as primordial Ottoman Turks, having links to the original Turkic tribes that populated Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Europe. Indeed, Georgian historical documents claim that Meskhetian Turks, who speak the Kars dialect of Turkish and belong to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, are Georgians whose ancestors converted to Islam in the period between the sixteenth century and 1829, a time when the region of Meskheti-Dzhavakheti was under the sway of the Ottoman Empire. Russian sources claim that the Meskhetian Turks originated from Gunno-Bolvarian and other Turkic tribes that appeared in the Caucasus in the second century BC. Meskhetian Turks living in St Louis tend to agree with the second version, adding that they are direct descendants of Ottoman Turks.
It is not clear whether the Meskhetian Turks were once Christians and ethnic Georgians or whether they were ethnic Turks who converted to Islam. What is clear is that in the contemporary history of the twentieth century, the lives of Meskhetians have been marked by brutal divide-and-rule policies of the Soviet Union and the inter-ethnic strife of the post-Communist successor states. The nationalities policy of the USSR entailed a certain contradiction: on one hand, it had a strong and sincere commitment to forming a multicultural state, without any hostility to ethnic and national identities, which was probably one of the reasons for its relatively peaceful existence as a multicultural state for over 70 years; but on the other, the USSR carried a punitive character towards “suspicious ethnicities”—that is, ethnic groups believed to have close ties with Soviet enemies or those who were otherwise considered, for a variety of reasons, as potential threats to the state. Terri Martin, in analyzing the Soviet domestic nationalities policy, notes two Bolshevik concepts, which he calls “Soviet Xenophobia” and the “Piedemont Principle”. By the former, he means the “exaggerated Soviet fear of foreign influence and foreign contamination”. An interesting side of the Soviet xenophobia was that it was ideological, not ethnic, for it was stimulated by an ideological suspicion of foreign governments, not the hatred of non-Russians. The Soviet government was thus especially xenophobic or suspicious toward a variety of ethnicities situated on its borders. On the other hand, the Soviet government “aimed to emphasize and promote the ethnic diversity” and even cultural pride and a form of nationalism of its various border regions rather than “restricting national self-expression in the border regions”. This somewhat contrary policy was a form of realism in protecting the massive socialist entity from capitalist influence, but was also aimed at promoting the Soviet image abroad under what Martin calls the “Piedmont Principle”. (Martin named Piedmont Principle after the 19th century process of consolidation of the Italian state around the northern province of Piedmont.) By having generous policies towards the nationalities living on its borders, the Soviet leadership hoped to attract populations related to its own minority ethnicities, which lived across the border from the Soviet Union. Thus, “while Soviet Xenophobia encouraged ethnic suspicions, the Piedmont Principle dictated an instantaneous promotion of national institutions”. These policies in contrary ways both affected the Meskhetian Turks, whose homeland was situated in a border area but whose loyalties, in the eyes of Moscow, were never certain to the Soviet Union or, as a result of their experiences with displacements, to their host populations.

From Georgia to Central Asia

During World War II, the Soviet policy makers initiated the deportation of eight entire nationalities, including the Meskhetian Turks (the others were Volga Germans, Karachai, Kalmyks, Chechen, Ingush, Balkars, and Crimean Tatars). In November 1944, the Meskhetian Turks, along with some other smaller ethnic groups of Southern Georgia, were suddenly deported to Central Asia. According to Dmitriy Nikitin, the number of deportees, including Meskhetian Turks, Khemshils, and Kurds, was 95,000, although Western historical accounts indicate even higher figures for deportees, of between 150,000 and 200,000. On the morning of 15 November, the NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affaires) surrounded the villages of the condemned people and transported them to the train station where they were herded in unheated and unhygienic freight train cars. Alim, a recent arrival to St Louis, recalls of that period:

Before the 1944 deportation, our people lived and worked peacefully in South Georgia, on the border with Turkey. We faced a huge misfortune on November
14, 1944. While our fathers and brothers were struggling in a war defending their Motherland, their wives, children and grandparents were herded into cold freight carts and forcefully relocated to what was to them unknown lands. Since that time, we have been granted an undeserved stereotype of an “enemy” population.

Fifteen thousand people—or nearly one in six of those deported—from among the Meskhetian Turks and other peoples amongst them are said to have died en-route to Central Asia due to harsh conditions. They were often forced to keep the decaying bodies of their relatives and comrades on the train until given the opportunity to throw the bodies out or if lucky bury them along the long journey, which lasted for almost two months. Many men who fought in the Soviet Red Army against Nazi Germany had to search for their families after the war.

Concrete reasons for the deportation orders have remained unclear. The deportees were not provided with any explanation whatsoever, either written or oral, and their deportation was never mentioned in the official Soviet documents of that period. There was some speculation for the reasons behind this deportation: there is some evidence, for example, that at that time Stalin had designs to invade Turkey and thereby wished to clear the Transcaucasia of “suspicious” ethnic elements who might hinder his war plans. Due to their cultural, religious, linguistic, and territorial proximity to Turkey, and their sizeable numbers, Meskhetian Turks were the first on the list of suspected ethnic groups. There might even have been some historical basis to Stalin’s fears: Nikolai Bugai, a Soviet historian who studied the deportations of Soviet people, claims that in 1918, during the Turkish offensive on Georgia through Meskhetia, the Muslim population of this region had sided with the Turks, and thus could not be trusted. Lavrenty Beria, the feared chairman of NKVD, had advocated the removal of “suspicious” Muslim populations from Georgian territory, and after receiving the official approval of Stalin, Beria scheduled the deportations to begin on November 15, 1944.

Those of the deportees who survived the gruelling journey were soon resettled in small groups in the territories of Kazakhstan (29,497 persons), Kirghizia (9,911), and above all Uzbekistan (42,618), where they were known as “special settlers”. Initially the Soviet regime assigned most of the settled Meskhetian Turks to agricultural work. They lived in isolated settlements, lacking heat, forced to endure overcrowded and unhygienic conditions. Among other things, many lives were lost as a result of typhus epidemics. Between the beginning of 1945 and the end of 1950, the NKVD and MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) recorded 19,047 deaths (20% of the deportees) among the Turks, Kurds and Khemshils in social settlements. They were not allowed to change their residence and had to appear once a month for registration at the official institutions. Their children could not attend school because they had to work, owing to economic need or state requirements. It appears that the Stalin regime, already known to inflict human suffering to and even extermination of its opponents, had no concern over the high mortality rates among the deportees of “suspected” ethnic groups.

After Stalin’s death, the Meskhetian Turks remained confined to special settlements in Central Asia for several more years. The first step in the dismantling of the special settlements took place on 5 July 1954 when the Council of Ministers of the USSR released all children under 16, including Turks, Kurds, and Khemshils, from special settlement duties and forced residence. However, they did not grant a petition for the Meskhetian Turks to return to their original homeland in southern Georgia. The majority of Meskhetian Turks thus remained in Central Asia until the late 1980s and early 1990s.
Ferghana Pogrom and Exile from Central Asia

The period of 1989 and 1990 was associated with multiple violent ethnic conflicts that broke out in various parts of USSR. In May–June of 1989 one such ethnic conflict occurred between the two ethnic Turkic peoples of Meskhetians and Uzbeks in the Ferghana Valley, culminating in the deaths of at least 100 people, the separation of family members, and in the massive resettlement of Meskhetian Turks. The clashes and the resettlements destroyed most of what the Meskhetian Turk diaspora had managed to build in Uzbekistan. Conflicts and massive violence took place in other parts of Uzbekistan as well.

Raziya, who resided with her family in Alimkent (Tashkent region), recalls the events that took place in her town:

There was a huge panic in the streets. Turks were running away. I was in the eighth month of pregnancy. My husband’s father was in his deathbed. We decided not to tell him anything. My husband was running between two fires. On the one hand he had a sick father to take care of [and who could not easily relocate], on the other he had to think of my safety. He made a decision to send me to Kazakhstan with his sister while he remained in Alimkent with his father. We went to Kazakhstan on a bus. There were more people in the bus than seats, so, people took turns sitting. We arrived at Berken and the locals were very kind to us. Much thanks is due to the Kazakh government for accepting us at that critical time and supporting their local [Meskhetian] Turkish people. We lived in the local Turks’ houses for about a week until news arrived from Alimkent that the situation had calmed down in Uzbekistan. I soon found out that my father-in-law had died. He did so without knowing what had happened.

Despite the calm, a resolution on 13 July 1989, of the Union of Ministers of the USSR, ordered the evacuation of Meskhetian Turks residing in Ferghana Valley to Russia. Seventeen thousand Meskhetian Turks were forced to migrate to Nechernozem’e (“the non-black earth territories”). Most moved to Russia, some to Azerbaijan, and a small number to Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The administration of the then Soviet Republic of Georgia, the land where the Meskhetians were originally from, refused to accept them, however. Later, another 70,000 Meskhetian Turks residing in other parts of Uzbekistan were also forced to leave. Leila was living with her family in Samarqand when they were forced to leave. This is her account of her experience during that period:

I was born in Tumenarik, Kazakhstan. I married at the age of 23 and moved with my husband to Uzbekistan. In Samarqand, I started working as an instructor at a local kindergarten. After a while, I decided to continue my education and went to the Pedagogical Institute, where I studied part time. After graduating from the institute, I was promoted to be the position of ‘methodologist’ [education specialist], a position which required me to inspect kindergartens and check the work of the teachers.

In 1984, I gave a birth to a handsome baby boy. He had golden curly hair and everybody said that he looked more Russian than Turk! My second child was born in 1988. We had a very good life during this period. People respected me and valued my work. Every three years I was sent to the capital city for training to improve my qualifications. Furthermore, because I spoke very good
Russian, I was often sent to different parts of the country to participate at conferences and meetings.

Then in 1989, on June 3rd, there was a huge conflict in Ferghana Valley [between the local Uzbek and Meskhetian Turkish populations]. That’s when our lives changed completely. The whole country felt unsafe for us. We couldn’t sleep at night. There were people who would walk around the town holding loud speakers and yelling: “Turks, go away! If you won’t leave, we will kill you. You will face the destiny of those in Ferghana”. The local authorities conducted a meeting where they asked us to leave for good. They said they don’t want any bloodshed in their town. So, just in one day over 90% of the [Meskhetian] Turks left [Samarqand and its surroundings].

We took a bus to Turkmenistan. There we crossed the Caspian Sea on a ship and came to Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan we were placed on an airplane that took us to Minvodi (southern part of Russia) and from there we went to Nalchik in Kabardino Balkaria (southern part of Russia), where we spent nearly six months. The local population was very friendly at first, but after more and more of our ethnic cohorts started to arrive, our presence began to cause irritation among the locals and we started hearing people say that they don’t want us living there. We thus had to leave that town as well. That’s how we came to Krasnodar region.

The reason behind the original clashes between the Uzbek and Meskhetian Turks still remains unclear. The official press merely indicated that they were a result of the ethnic tension between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks. However, it is not clear as to why tensions would rise among the two, given the fact that the Meskhetian Turks were, among all the resettled nations in Uzbekistan, the closest to the Uzbek population in faith, culture, and language. Tofik Kudrayev, a Meskhetian who was born in Georgia and was deported to Kazakhstan in 1944, has published a book titled *The Memory of the Nation*, in which he claims that one of the reasons behind the attack on the Meskhetian Turks in Ferghana was that the majority of Meskhetian Turks possessed larger sections of land than the local Uzbek population—thus feelings of resentment by local Uzbeks (the majority) over a relatively wealthier minority group at a time of political and economic crises in a densely populated region of the Soviet Union may have been a major reason behind the attacks. According to Kudrayev, two-thirds of Uzbekistan’s inhabitants have been living in rural areas, thus, the question of fair land ownership had been, and remains today, central to the economic and political stability of Uzbekistan. Khazanov also claims that there was evidence to suspect that disturbances in the Ferghana Valley were not completely spontaneous, that they were thoroughly organized and planned in advance.

Some claim that the anti-Meskhetian riots occurred as a result of a form of instigation that included directed mob participation in pogroms. In fact, the attacks against the Meskhetian Turks happened to begin just as Islam Karimov was taking power in Uzbekistan; according to Mark Beissinger, Karimov’s regime, “through a skillful campaign of consistent repression, cooption, and divide-and-conquer tactics”, was working to diffuse all potential sources of disorder. Also, it is worth noting that about this time Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was introducing economic and political liberalization policies, which may have contributed to an atmosphere of economic uncertainty and thus animosity towards an ethnic minority (the Meskhetian Turks) perceived to be rich by the local
poor (from the ethnic Uzbek). The anti-Meskhetian Turk outbursts thus lifted the lid on simmering nationalist sentiment among Uzbeks, owing to the economic instability in the country, and the increase of poverty, especially in the rural areas. Also, overcrowded conditions in the Fergana Valley, combined with widespread poverty, may well have fuelled interethnic hostility by themselves. The questions remain: could all these factors have been reasons for these attacks? And, who exactly, if anyone at all, was behind these attacks? Raziya’s husband Ilyas, has his own opinion on this:

You see the politics of Moscow was to master the earth of Chernozem [Blackearth—southern Russia’s black, rich soil]. Our people mostly dealt with agriculture. Those in Sirdarya mostly dealt with cotton. At the beginning of 1980s our people were invited to go to Krasnodar to plant tobacco. Approximately 2000 people agreed to go.

There were also rumours indicating that a few days before this pogrom occurred, the emissaries of Uzbekistan’s popular movement “Birlik” called the people of Ferghana Valley to deal a severe blow on the Meskhetian Turks. Ilyas was aware of these rumours:

I heard people saying that the leaders of “Birlik” approached us [Meskhetian Turks] and the Korean people and asked them to collaborate with them in their struggle for independence. Our leaders rejected their offer because they did not want to have any troubles with the central government, since we are a peaceful people. But as an act of revenge “Birlik” leaders disposed [sic.] the local Uzbeks against us.

**Persecution in Krasnodar**

Because of the favourable climatic conditions, many Meskhetian Turks moved to the Krasnodar region, where 250 Meskhetian families were already residing, most having become tobacco farmers in the mid-1970s when they had accepted an invitation from the local government to fill a workforce shortage in the tobacco plantations. However, the local authorities in Krasnodar refused to accept Meskhetians as legal residents, depriving them and their children of their citizenship rights. Ilyas shared his experience by stating:

Soon after our arrival, we managed to buy a house in Krasnodar. The Greeks and Tatars were leaving at that time and sold their houses to us for cheap. We had some money because the Uzbek government bought our houses. The conditions in Krasnodar were terrible. There was no gas. We had to start our lives from the very beginning. The first two years we were allowed to drive our cars with Uzbek plates. Then after the collapse of the Soviet Union they gave us special car plates, which started with the letters KKZ. This was a good way for militia to recognize Turks and ask them for money. Then they changed the plates to a yellow color, which helped them identify us from a distance. After 1996 they stopped issuing plates for Turks. Every 45 days we had to pay 288 roubles . . . [just so that] so we could live there!

Moreover, ethnic discrimination in the Krasnodar region became a fundamental part of its local politics. A Russian political scientist, Vladimir Ilyushenko, explained the situation thus:

Pogroms, acts of vandalism, slaughter and murder on the basis of national origins does not surprise anybody anymore—they have become a normal way
of our lives, our everyday companions. The number of such crimes constantly increases, yet the authorities refuse to regard it as a serious issue, explaining it differently [in the form of] illegal migration, inobservance of passport regime and [among other things] registration regulations . . . As a result, not only xenophobia, but also Nazism becomes a marginal phenomenon in our lives . . .

Leila described her own experience in Krasnodar. It is worth noting that Leila was often taken to be Russian, so that although she herself also suffered discrimination and hardship, she was sometimes able to observe from afar the scorn and mistreatment that her Meskhetian Turkish friends and relatives experienced on the streets. She recounts:

Krasnodar took away my two children. My son died on the second day of our arrival. He was eight years old. He was crossing the street when a drunk driver hit him. There was no limit to my grief. When my youngest daughter turned two-and-a-half, I took her to the local hospital to have her inoculated. Having a fever was a natural reaction for children after inoculation shots. But my daughter had an exceptionally high fever of up to 40 degrees. We took her to the hospital but the doctor there assured us that it was a natural reaction. After some time the fever decreased and my daughter was back to normal condition. However, in 2 months she was feeling very weak. She hardly spoke, walked very little and had almost no strength to play.

I couldn’t trust the doctors in Krasnodar anymore so we took my little girl to Tashkent [Uzbekistan]. We spent two months in the hospital. But her condition worsened day after day. The doctors said that the inoculation somehow damaged her central nervous system and that in a short period of time she will be completely paralyzed. We returned to Krasnodar with no hope for my daughter’s recovery. I tried to gather all of my strength and went around the local hospitals pleading for any kind of help. Neither the government, nor the hospitals were willing to help us. We needed money to keep on buying medicine.

After realizing that these agencies won’t be of any help, I decided to apply for assistance to the Krasnodar Department of Social Needs of the Population. A woman greeted me there with a warm smile. She listened to my story and assured me that she will do her best to help me. Then I made a confession. I told her that I was not Russian, that I was Turkish. Her face turned angry. She said that I have to get out of her room immediately. “We don’t help Turkish people”, she said, “Get out of my office and of my country; there is no place for Turks here.” I was crying and saying that my child was born here and Russian doctors ruined her. But she just pushed me out and slammed the door in front of my nose.

My daughter was paralyzed for ten years. She had no life in her. It was miserable for me to see her in such condition. But every day I managed to smile and joke in front of her. She loved it when I cooked pelmeni for her. I would chew the food before giving it to her. One day I cooked her pelmeni and brought a plate of it into her room. She looked at me and smiled. I gave her some tea and felt that she had difficulty swallowing it. She started choking. Her father came into the
room. He lifted her and put her head on his shoulder. She died within a minute in his hands. That’s how I lost my two children.

From the point of view of the Krasnodar regional authorities, Meskhetian Turks were “unsanctionally migrated citizens, who personally chose regions of Russia for residing”.34 This official position gave the Meskhetians no right to have a permanent residence in the region. Moreover, a refusal to provide a legal status to Meskhetians is known to also have been meant to stimulate their departure from the region and to prevent the arrival of new migrants.35

Another obstacle facing the Meskhetians was that during the period 1990–1992 the Russian administration issued coupons to all workers, but paid the Meskhetians cash instead. Such staples as sugar, flour, butter, and soap, normally quite expensive, were sold with special coupons. This is Hamida’s experience during this time:

The government never gave us coupons. My daughter was 9 months old. There was an old Russian lady living next to us. She felt really sorry for my daughter, so, every time she received coupons she would give them to me.

The legal position of Meskhetian Turks’ in Russia was adjusted as early as 1991 by the Russian Federation Law “On Citizenship” (Article 13.1). Since they permanently resided in the Russian Federation when that law came into force, the law granted them citizenship and this was confirmed by the Russian Supreme Court.36 In 26 regions of Russia, where Meskhetian Turks still reside, the law is respected, with nearly all Meskhetians having received passports as Russian citizens. However, the Meskhetian Turks living in Krasnodar have not been treated as equals under the law, because the leadership of Krasnodar Territory appears not to respect the law and to disregard it instead. Among other things, the attitude of the Governor of the Krasnodar Territory, Alexander Tkachyov, has played a vital role in the formation of aggressive and what can only be categorized as local racist attitudes towards the Meskhetians.37 Tkachyov not only approved but also inspired the anti-Meskhetian campaigns in the media and anti-Meskhetian actions of Cossack extremist organizations. He has explained his position by stating that the life-style of Meskhetian Turks does not match that of the local population of Krasnodar and that the region is “strangling” due to the inflow of immigrants.38

Hamida says:

Our children studied in Turkish classes. Russian kids studied before lunch and Turkish kids after lunch. After hearing about our possible emigration to the US, my daughter’s teacher had told my daughter in class: ‘I don’t understand why America would want these sheep. You are all sheep, why would they need you?’ We endured other insults from the local population. A common one went something like: ‘Hey you black-asses, get out of our land. Kozan is for the Cossack.’

In 2002, authorities in the Krasnodar administration took measures corresponding with the expiration of the temporary registration held by most Krasnodar Meskhetians that reportedly cancelled leases on land or denied lease renewals for the 2002 agricultural season. In an apparent attempt to pressure the Meskhetians to leave, the regional legislature enacted a series of laws that banned residence registration for “stateless persons”, suggested more extensive passport and residence checks, and required strict administrative control over the issue of papers certifying land possession. The situation of Meskhetians in Krasnodar thus became desperate to the point where women organized a protest against the government.
Raziya, one of the women actively promoting the rights of Meskhetian Turks, had this to say:

Our patience was exhausted. Women gathered at our leader’s house and pleaded with him to take action. We even decided to go on a hunger strike, which started on August 21 and lasted for 21 days. The local officials sent out some people to find out if the strike was fake or real. An ambulance came to check our health and took three of us to the hospital. Our hunger strike coincided with two events: Firstly, a neighboring town was flooded during that period and so, they would mock our condition and demands by reporting on TV that even though people are dying from floods and their houses are being destroyed, the Meskhetians are going on hunger strike. Secondly, August 21 was the first day of the Battle of Stalingrad of World War II. [The Battle of Stalingrad is considered to be the bloodiest battle recorded in human history. It began in August 1942 and ended on February 2, 1943.] The local officials thus even linked us to Hitler for our actions. But we didn’t give up.

One day a bus full of Cossacks approached the building where we had our strike. They set up a grill and started cooking kebab with pork. Then they poured home-made vodka into glasses and took kebab sticks in their hands and started waving them in front of the nose of hungry people. It was humiliating. They yelled: “Hey Turks, take it easy, learn how to have a good time from us. Let’s make peace.” They then laughed and drank vodka and ate the kebabs right in front of us.

The representative of Novorossiysk human rights organization “School of Peace”, Vadim Karastelyov, had been assisting the Meskhetians in their hunger strike. The agency was then accused by the main department of justice of the Krasnodar territory of having only one founding member and was liquidated in 2003 by the court. According to Caucasian Knot, government claims against the “School of Peace” are connected with their active position on the advocacy of Meskhetian Turks’ rights.39

Resettlement in the United States

As the situation of the Meskhetian Turks in the Krasnodar region was unbearable, elements within the US government stretched a helping hand and approved a resettlement program for those Meskhetians who had been living in the Krasnodar region for at least 15 years. According to Novorossiysk City Committee on Human Rights, as of summer 2005, over 7,000 people had submitted their applications for participation in the resettlement program carried out by the US State Department. Only those Meskhetians subjected to discrimination from the Krasnodar regional authorities were eligible to participate in this program.

While his extended family was not sure if another resettlement was good for them, Alim, the father of four children, was among the first to apply for this program. His extended family is now living in St Louis. He recalled:

On March 1st [2004] I submitted my documents and on February 4th [2005] we departed from Krasnodar to St Louis. I feel like I am at home here in St Louis. We are the people with no homeland. Our parents claim Georgia to be our homeland because they were born there. But nobody wants us there.
Uzbekistan kicked us out and Russia hates us. I truly hope that my children will be happy here. Do you know what homeland is for me? A homeland for me is a place where my children are happy. I hope that America is our last destination.

Conclusion

The dislocations and persecutions of the Meskhetian Turks appear to have taken place owing to no fault of theirs. They were first moved because their position in their homeland was considered a threat to Soviet planners. Their disparate experiences in Central Asia seemed also to have been shaped by policies of the regimes in power. And the pogrom against them in Uzbekistan just prior to the dismantling of the USSR may have been instigated for political reasons emanating from changes in policy, in administrative personnel, and even due to competition over natural resources at a time of economic crisis. They evince in stark form the extent to which the perceptions and concerns of those in power, however accurate or inaccurate they may be, directly affect the affairs of ordinary people. As such, the Meskhetian Turks, largely a stateless people, have been through a lot of misery and humiliation. Today, however, many among them are given a chance to start a new life in which they and their future generations are assured basic human rights, such as freedom from persecution and fear. For the first time since their deportation in 1944, many of the Meskhetians are being offered a chance to, in a way, share a motherland. Only time will tell if this latest dwelling will be the last stop for this suffering nation.

NOTES

1. This paper in its original version was presented at the “Central Eurasian Studies Society Sixth Annual Conference”, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 29 September–2 October 2005.
3. To protect their privacy, the names of the interviewees have been changed.
7. Ibid., p. 829.
8. Ibid., p. 831.
9. Ibid., p. 832.
11. Anatolii Khazanov, After the USSR, op. cit.
12. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Interview with Beinali, St Louis, MO, 21 May 2005.
20. Interview with Beinali, op. cit.
24. Tofik Kudrayev, Kniga Narodnoy Pamyati (Turkah) (Book on People’s Memory (about Turks)), Almati, Kazakhstan: no publisher indicated, 1996.
25. Ibid.
31. Beginning in 1989, ethnic Greeks and Crimean Tatars began returning to the Crimea and Greece.
32. Dmitriy Nikitin, “Turki Meskhetinci: vopros zakrit?” op. cit.
33. Pelmeni is a national Eastern European (mainly Russian) dish, usually made with minced meat filling, wrapped in thin dough.
34. Dmitriy Nikitin, “Turki Meskhetinci”, op. cit.
35. Ibid.
37. It is worth noting that Alexander Tkachyov Krasnodar, a regional governor, was named ‘Person of the Year’ in 2003 for his personal contribution in developing Russia’s political system and for his efficiency in the administration.
38. Dmitriy Nikitin, “Turki Meskhetinci”, op. cit.
Interpreters, Arbiters or Outsiders: The Role of the Min kao Han in Xinjiang Society

JENNIFER TAYNEN

Abstract

This paper attempts to identify the variables that define the political and social boundaries within Xinjiang’s multi-ethnic society. Traditionally, ethnicity has been the point from which scholars examine political and social loyalties in Xinjiang. It is proposed here that, while ethnicity is a crucial component in defining the divisions in Xinjiang society, it is also important to consider the role of language. This latter trait cuts across ethnic lines and is responsible for creating important subgroups within established communities. The paper will demonstrate that while the Uighur Min kao Han are ethnically Uighur, they culturally and linguistically have taken on many ethnic Chinese characteristics. They are favoured for admission into Chinese society and receive political and employment advantages over their co-ethnics who remain linguistically/culturally Uighur. However, these advantages do not always materialize and the social costs are high. The Min kao Han are generally excluded from the Uighur community, while simultaneously enduring discrimination from the Han. It is argued here that the history of the Min kao Han, as well as the trends in Chinese politics and society affecting this group’s future development, are key to understanding what their current role is and will be in the future. It is clear that the psychological condition of the Min kao Han is largely the result of their isolated position in Xinjiang society, and of their experience as children in Han classrooms. It will be shown that there is potential for this group to lead the Uighur population into conflict with the Han, but also, and more importantly, for them to help facilitate reconciliation.

Introduction

Many researchers have observed a strong correlation between political and ethnic lines in what is now Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China. Some have found that alternative variables, such as religion, regionalism and socio-economic class also correspond to political and social boundaries within Xinjiang’s multi-ethnic society. It is proposed here that language in combination with ethnicity acts as a more effective indicator of social and political values than the individual forms of categorization suggested by earlier researchers.

The role of ethnicity in determining group boundaries and loyalties is in evidence all over Xinjiang. A narrative of common history, strengthened by fervent belief in blood ties and the tangible evidence of shared culture, all render ethnicity a key component of individual identification. Ethnicity then in turn becomes a definitive condition for exclusion from, and inclusion in, the various communities that make up Xinjiang society. The significance of language can be observed in its encompassing of all Turkic-speaking minority groups.
into a larger collective cultural/political entity, and in its exclusion from this entity of ethnic Turks who have adopted Mandarin as a primary language of communication.

“Sinofied” minorities find themselves inhabiting an ill-defined and uncomfortable middle ground, and they contend with levels of isolation and discrimination not encountered by individuals who remain within the linguistic confines of their ethnic communities. To illustrate these trends, the experiences of Uighurs educated in Mandarin schools will be contrasted with other Uighurs educated in minority schools and those of Han Chinese. To further clarify the position of these sinofied minorities, some of the sources of tension fracturing the province’s population will be examined. Finally, it is argued here that the culturally alienated, or sinofied, Uighurs are the product of the changeable political climate in Xinjiang. An examination of the conditions in which a given generation came into their majority will be included here, as this information is not only critical to understanding each age group’s place in the larger social mosaic, but is also important in recognizing how present conditions have been constructed, and in projecting how the future generation of sinofied Uighurs will fare.

Min kao Han, literally translating as “minority who studies Chinese”, is the Mandarin title given to sinofied minorities. They are the combined product of government education policy and social pressures within minority populations. Although culturally and linguistically they have a foot in both communities, in the case of the Uighur minority, they are excluded from full inclusion in either sphere. As a result, they are beginning to form a third community, which demonstrates a set of loyalties and political views as consistent across its membership as those observed in the ethnic groups (both minority and Han) that have retained an ethnic/linguistic national identity. Like the rest of the Uighur community, the Min kao Han that I encountered while in Xinjiang are not supportive of the Chinese presence in the region. However, in contrast to their Min kao Min (literally, “minority [who] studies minority”, and referring to individuals of minority extraction who have studied at minority schools) counterparts, they tend to have a pessimistic assessment of the current and future prospects of minorities in their province.

This paper will focus on the significance of language-based social division, as illustrated through accounts of Min kao Han in Urumqi, and examination of their place in Xinjiang’s broader multi-ethnic society. In this instance, “place” refers not only to physical location, but also social, economic and political placement within the framework of life in Urumqi. Today, the Min kao Han have reached a critical turning point. Rapid social and economic changes taking place within the Uighur community mean that the future experiences of today’s youngest generation of Uighur Min kao Han will likely differ greatly from those of earlier generations. Defining them as a group, outlining their origins, and then noting the trends in the community that will influence young Min kao Han, will allow a greater understanding of the unique socio-political role that they play in Xinjiang.

Defining Features of the Min kao Han

The translation of Min kao Han as “minorities (who) study Chinese” is deceptively straightforward, and belies the social assumptions with which this term is loaded. For example, determining if an individual of minority extraction is Min kao Han is simply a process of ascertaining the language of instruction at the schools he/she attended. In a literal sense, the label Min kao Han is used by both Uighur and Han without being offensive; however, it can also have negative or derogatory implications, particularly when used by Min kao Min. In certain situations Uighurs can be very uncomfortable being labelled as
Min kao Han. Complicating the prejudice against this group is the fact that it is not always superficially evident who is a Min kao Han. Even so, certain group characteristics render identification a little easier. These are education level, socio-economic position and employment, dress, family background and, of course, language of communication.

**Education Level**

Min kao Han students have generally studied at Han schools from their early primary years through to the end of high school or university. As recently as 1999 all Xinjiang’s major universities offered instruction in the Uighur language. However, the first steps in a province-wide restructuring of the education system have seen the removal of Uighur as an instructional language at the post-secondary level. To compensate, Min kao Min students are required to take a preliminary year of intensive Chinese language study prior to entering the regular university system. But despite being theoretically prepared for university level courses in this second (or in some cases third) language, Min kao Min students are still segregated from the Han and Min kao Han students upon officially entering their programs of study.

Theoretically the Min kao Min and Min kao Han have equal access to university education, but the reality is that both financially and academically the Min kao Han have the upper hand. Among other things, financially, the Min kao Han are spared the cost of an extra year of study. For many families in China, the outlay needed to put a child through university is prohibitive. A fifth year’s expenses are not inconsequential, and can be the determining factor in a student’s decision not to pursue post-secondary education. Academically, Min kao Han students are at an advantage as their predominantly Han classes will be able to cover more material in greater depth. Furthermore, Min kao Han students can apply to universities outside Xinjiang, which means the way to top tier Chinese universities is open to them should they perform well on the entrance exams. Finally, while many Uighur students in urban areas complete high school, in rural areas (where there are very few Min kao Han) drop-out levels are high and many Uighur students do not continue beyond grade ten level. Given all these factors, it is not surprising to find that among Uighurs who complete high school and go on to university, the Min kao Han are over-represented.

**Socioeconomic Status and Employment**

Naturally, educational advantages place the Min kao Han in a better economic position than the Min kao Min. While both groups face challenges of racial discrimination in their search for employment, the Min kao Han are significantly better equipped to succeed economically. A disproportionately low number of Uighurs hold high-level government jobs, but of those that do, most are Min kao Han. A further trend compounding this economic advantage is that nearly all Min kao Han live in urban centres. Like many parts of China, Xinjiang is still developing, and the urban–rural divide found across the country is equally evident in that province. In their demographic research Emily Hannum and Yu Xie found that approximately 70% of agricultural workers were ethnic minorities. Villages, which are largely minority-populated, often lack basic sanitation, running water, high schools and medical services. In contrast, urban centres, while home to a significant underprivileged population, do provide modern amenities and conveniences to those able to pay for them. The resentment of rural minorities for urban minorities and their perceived affluence has evolved into the belief that
parents who educate their children in Mandarin are pursuing financial and social benefits at the expense of the interests of the larger ethnic community.

**Dress**

Especially in urban centres, dress or attire is an increasingly unreliable means of identifying Min kao Han. Because education and language are key in maintaining culture, early immersion of Uighur children in Chinese schools invariably results in their acquisition of Chinese customs and values. With the barrage of Chinese language media available, Min kao Han children are irresistibly drawn to Chinese movies, TV shows, comic books, and music. This is not without visible affect. Since the Chinese now almost exclusively favour Western dress, the headscarves, dopas, and long garments traditionally worn by Uighur men and women do not match the images portrayed in the Chinese media. Min kao Han thus tend to dress in Western fashion, adopting the clothing styles that are seen all across East Asia. During my two years in Xinjiang, I encountered no Min kao Han woman or girl who wears a headscarf; however, aside from “sinofication”, this could also be attributed to religious restrictions on government employees and their families. In contrast to these Chinese/Western styles, many Min kao Min continue to favour conservative traditional dress. However, these observations must be qualified. In many cases, particularly among younger urban Min kao Min, a growing number of individuals favour Western style attire. Though Western dress is an increasingly unreliable means of identifying Min kao Han, clothing still remains a useful indicator as conservative Muslim dress remains a distinctive trait of the Min kao Min.

**Family Background**

Another common feature of the Min kao Han is that, in both the Communist and traditional sense, they come from “good” families. Min kao Han who are in their twenties and thirties today are the second generation of Uighurs raised under Communism. For their parents to have educated them in Chinese suggests at least grudging cooperation with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. Not surprisingly, this second generation of Min kao Han abounds with children of government officials and party members. Most of them grew up in comparatively comfortable conditions and were exposed to orthodox party values, both at home and in their formal education. Ironically, their grandparents often hail from the original Uighur elite. The nascent CCP instated or co-opted much of the traditional minority leadership into the party as these elites had struggled against Guo Min Dang (GMD) rule, and could therefore be seen as Communist allies. Furthermore, co-option of the traditional Uighur elites by the Chinese simplified the process of imbuing the representatives of the new regime with authority. Their children then became the inheritors of the CCP mandate, and once having been properly schooled in Communist theory and Chinese language, were poised to become part of Xinjiang’s governing class.

**Language of Communication**

The most definitive trait of the Min kao Han is their proficiency in written and spoken Chinese. This group is often more comfortable using their adopted language than their own mother tongue, and when speaking together, they shift easily between Chinese and Uighur. In contrast, Min kao Min etiquette demands that ethnic Uighurs
be meticulous in addressing one another in the Uighur language. Failure to do so can be an insult, and it is not uncommon to observe a Uighur apologize profusely to another Uighur (cab driver, sales person, etc.) whom they have mistakenly addressed in Mandarin. A Min kao Han couple among the diaspora Uighurs with whom I am acquainted encountered language difficulties within the Toronto Uighur community. The wife, who is most comfortable communicating in Mandarin, was lapsing into that language at Uighur social gatherings. While this may appear insignificant, her unconscious use of Chinese was seen as a social barrier in the couple’s circle, and fed the already prevalent distrust in that community against ethnic Uighurs who use Mandarin comfortably.\footnote{13}

Another common feature of the two younger generations of Min kao Han is that, while they may speak Uighur with relative ease, they are often illiterate in that language. For Min kao Han who already speak the language, literacy would require nothing more than memorizing the phonetic 32-character Arabic alphabet. The fact that most cannot read or write leads one to speculate as to what prevents them or their parents from correcting this simple omission.

**Today’s Min kao Han**

Most researchers trying to gather data pertaining to minorities in Xinjiang have found that it is impossible to collect statistics without government involvement. Unfortunately, working with government supervision can drastically diminish the accuracy of the data collected.\footnote{14} Because of these conditions, the vast majority of work conducted by scholars such as Dru Gladney and Gardner Bovingdon relies more on personal observation and anecdotal accounts than on statistical evidence. For my own work, I chose to accumulate data by talking with individuals in informal settings, and by asking them similar questions concerning their own educational backgrounds and current conditions. This protocol was simple to follow, as people often talk about family and childhood experiences. This methodology was favoured over conducting formal surveys or interviews, which could cause problems for the participants and the researcher.

It is appropriate to mention here some of the limitations of my research. First, my facility with the Uighur language was not sufficient to allow me to develop close ties with non-Mandarin speakers, so my contact with ethnic Uighurs has been largely limited to the Min kao Han. A further constraint on the objectivity of my observations is that, in my circle of acquaintances, women are better represented than men. As a female in a Muslim society this was a difficult pattern to avoid. It is rare for Uighur men and women to establish close or even casual friendships; even at social events such as weddings and circumcision parties the segregation of male and female guests is carefully maintained.\footnote{15} Another note regarding my study is that the ages of most of my Min kao Han contacts range from approximately 20 to 36. My knowledge of the older generation of Min kao Han is primarily derived from accounts of friends’ parents. Furthermore, contact with Min kao Han children was generally through friends’ families, or observation of Min kao Han students in Han classrooms where I taught.

Perhaps the simplest way of breaking down the Min kao Han population and examining their experiences is to divide them into generational groups. Different political, material and social conditions have shaped each generation’s development, rendering their experiences within Uighur and Han spheres unique. In this section I will thus examine three generations of Min kao Han: elderly retirees, working adults and school-aged children, as well as identifying some of the classroom experiences that are common to all.
The Elderly

Elderly Min kao Han are rare, partially because they are aging retirees and are thus less visible in the community, but mostly because there were very few of them to begin with. Simply put, not many Uighurs had the opportunity to attend Chinese schools 50 or 60 years ago. Until the last few decades, the Han population of Xinjiang was comparatively small, and many of the earliest Chinese Communists to arrive in the region learned the Uighur language themselves.

Prior to the 1949 Chinese takeover, Uighurs who harboured Communist sympathies had generally come into contact with Communist theory outside of Xinjiang. They were primarily children of the wealthy or landowning classes whose parents could afford to send them away to school. The pre-1949 Chinese Communist movement did not have the resources to initiate recruitment in minority areas, and so relied on ethnic minorities travelling to major Chinese centres to be agents for introducing Communist propaganda back into their home communities. While this generation of communists from wealthy backgrounds is common throughout China’s minority populations,16 what is unique in the case of Xinjiang’s minorities is that from the 1920s up to and beyond 1949 the strongest external socialist influence in the province came from the Soviet Union. As a result, some of the first Uighur Communist party members in Xinjiang studied their new philosophy in Russian rather than Chinese.17 Initially, this early introduction of Communist theory and propaganda into the region was an asset to the CCP’s fledgling government, but later during the Sino-Soviet split (beginning in the late 1950s), many of the more Soviet-minded Uighur leaders were quietly removed because of concerns over their political affiliations. This shift further opened the way for Chinese-trained Uighurs to move up the political ladder. The oldest generation of Min kao Han hails from this period, and enjoyed respected positions in the community. They were the bridge between the Chinese administrators and the local people, and successfully maintained close working relationships with the small number of Han who lived in Xinjiang during the early years of CCP rule.

The story of one Uighur friend’s family illustrates the trend outlined above. As a child she had questioned her grandfather about life before 1949; he had been adamant that the arrival of the Communists had significantly improved conditions. Their family had had large land holdings, and he told how during the 1930s and 1940s, prior to the CCP arrival, government tax collectors were constantly visiting their village to collect funds for projects such as roads, bridges or schools. However, government spending had rarely if ever actually materialized, and as the population was largely composed of poor farming families, the only tangible result was that livestock and other valuables were routinely seized when cash was not on hand. After the CCP arrived, the tax collectors ceased their visits, and for a time the village was left to its own devices. He was therefore surprised, on visiting the nearby city of Kashgar some years later, to discover that public schools, clinics and offices were being erected, all without squeezing the scant holdings of the peasants. This man never learned to speak Mandarin and so cannot be considered a Min kao Han. However, his account does shed light on the mindset of minority people who chose to have their children educated in Chinese. At least one of his sons attended Chinese school, and quickly rose through the ranks of the CCP during the 1960s. At that time Mandarin speakers in the Uighur population were scarce enough that facility in Chinese was almost always a guarantee of party membership. In the end, the son’s career trajectory led to one of the highest political positions available to Uighurs within the regional government.
The experience of many first generation Min kao Han with the Chinese people was positive. The few Han who initially came to Xinjiang brought new agricultural techniques that improved farming, and they were active participants in the construction of public works. Many Han attained functional fluency in the Uighur language, and nearly all abstained from practices that could have caused offence to the local Muslim population. Although the highest positions in the government were always reserved for the Han, the minuteness of the Chinese population in Xinjiang’s large territory meant that there were real opportunities for Mandarin-speaking Uighurs who wished to take part in government.

The Great Leap Forward in 1958 marked a turning point in the CCP’s minority policies. While geographic isolation spared Xinjiang from the full effects of the ensuing famines, shortages were compounded by the perception that the Han in Xinjiang were not suffering under the same conditions of material deprivation as the minorities. Later, the CCP government did eventually attempt reconciliation with Xinjiang’s indigenous peoples, but the level of goodwill that had existed prior to 1958 was never regained.

Despite the Great Leap Forward, the earliest generation of Min kao Han appears to have maintained the belief that the CCP has been a positive force in Xinjiang. This might be explained as the product of their educational indoctrination, but could also be attributed to the very real material improvements that their parents’ generation saw after the power shift of 1949. While the Democratic Republic of East Turkestan provided a brief period of minority self-government, that regime came shakily into power at a time of chaos in Xinjiang, when ethnic fighting and despotic warlords had erased all traces of public security. The fledgling Turkestan republic could hardly have been expected to establish order in the few short years that it governed, and the CCP represented the first true stability that the region had seen in decades. Societal memory can survive for generations, and the experience of the parents should not be discounted when examining the attitude of the children. Equal participation for minorities in the early years of the Communist government, and the material improvements that were brought about by the CCP, seem to have been the basis for the comparative tolerance or even approbation with which older Min kao Han, even today, view the Chinese.

Working Adult Min kao Han

While the oldest generation of Min kao Han have had their identity and position affirmed through their intermediary role between Uighur and Han, their children have not fared as well for a number of reasons. First, the second generation of Min kao Han came into their adulthood at a time of sharply increased Han immigration. Openings in government had not grown to keep pace with population growth, and hiring that favours Han has meant that Min kao Han are relegated to lower administrative positions from which there is no hope of promotion. Second, the sudden increase in the Han population has triggered insecurity among the Uighurs. Attacks on their culture and way of life are not official government policy, but are nonetheless felt. As a result, the Uighur community has come to see the Min kao Han as collaborators with an enemy. Third, larger Chinese population decreased Han incentive to accommodate the Uighur community. Whereas the first Han to arrive in Xinjiang had been respectful of minority populations, more recent waves of Han immigrants to the region have felt little need to learn even a few phrases of Uighur, or show consideration for Muslim customs, and what can be considered as anti-Uighur racism has become ingrained. It was common to have Chinese co-workers warn me of Uighur intellectual inferiority and dishonesty. Often this was part of a well-meant cautioning not to become frustrated with Uighur students’ ineptitude. Another
common warning was to be careful where I ate. Many Han are concerned that Uighurs are “unclean”.22 For Min kao Min, this attitude is infuriating, but it is something from which they are slightly removed by virtue of their linguistic segregation from the Han. For the Min kao Han, however, the racism they encounter can be devastating. It is a more constant experience for them because of their regular contact with Han people, for whom discriminatory views run along ethnic and not linguistic lines.

The flashpoint for all of this tension appears to be the workplace. Young adult Min kao Han are full of bitter anecdotes concerning employment. These include tales of being passed-over for promotions in favour of less qualified Han co-workers; workload increases with no compensation, which they are afraid to refuse; and job interviews arranged by telephone but cancelled when it is discovered that they are Uighur. Unequal employment opportunity is a constant theme of conversation among adult Uighurs; however, it is particularly acrimonious in the Min kao Han community where they feel they have sacrificed to gain advantages that have never materialized.

School-Aged Min kao Han

Today’s youngest Min kao Han are entering a very different world from that of their parents and grandparents. School-age Min kao Han can be divided into two subgroups. The first are Uighur children who attend Han school, but interact primarily with other Uighur children in their free time. The second group attend Han school, and outside of school socialize largely with Han children.

A friend’s two daughters are good examples of the first group. They live in the heart of the Uighur district, but both girls attend Han school. Both parents are Min kao Han. The father teaches Chinese to Uighur students at one of the local colleges, and the mother is a businesswoman. At home the girls speak a mixture of Uighur and Chinese, while in school they only speak Chinese. Their apartment complex, though ostensibly housing both Han and Uighur, is very much a Uighur-dominated environment. After school, the girls can generally be found outside in the yard of their building playing and speaking Uighur with Min kao Min Uighur children. It should be noted that while Han children their own age live in the complex, they do not appear to interact with them in their free time. It is too early to know how well these girls will master the languages, and how comfortably they will interact in the two ethnic communities, but for the present they are confident both academically and socially, and seem well-adjusted to what can be considered a split environment.

The second group is illustrated by students I observed in a middle school in Urumqi, Xinjiang’s capital, where I taught English from October of 2004 to March of 2005. Each class contained about 50 students, with never more than three minority students per classroom. The Min kao Han in these classes lived in a Han area of the city, and their interaction with other Uighurs was generally restricted to visits with relatives or to contact with other Min kao Han. In the classroom they were, almost without exception, quiet and avoided drawing unnecessary attention to themselves. From what I observed, they did interact with Han students in their free time, but appeared to be insecure about taking the lead in activities. I never heard them speaking in Uighur, though it is possible that they used their mother tongue when outside of school.

For Min kao Han children (and indeed for older generations) in either environment, social contact is further restricted by religion. A number of researchers have already examined the way in which halal dietary restrictions apply. These restrictions include the avoidance of pork, alcohol and, to a lesser extent, livestock not slaughtered according
to Islamic tradition, and they are used as a means of segregating Han and Uighur. Sharing food is an expression of friendship and hospitality in both the Han and Uighur cultures. The barrier posed by a halal diet means that religious Uighurs visiting a Han home cannot accept all proffered food or drink. I have yet to encounter a Uighur (either Min kao Min or Min kao Han) who does not observe halal rules. It should be noted, however, that no Uighur ever asked about my cooking practices when visiting my home, and there was not a single occasion in my nearly two years of residence in Urumqi when a Muslim declined refreshments prepared in my kitchen.

Refusal of refreshments is as great a slight in Chinese etiquette as it is in Uighur etiquette. Many Chinese are understandably offended by the idea that their food is “unclean”, for which reason the following anecdote reflecting the opposite perspective is particularly interesting. In the summer of 2004, I accompanied a Han class on an outing to a local park. A Uighur restaurant was selected for lunch, but three girls refused to eat there, saying that mutton (the primary meat in the Uighur diet) was “unclean”, and they could not eat in a restaurant where it was being prepared. Their choice of language and their refusal to compromise on the issue were perfect imitations of the protests that would be raised if a Uighur were to be invited to eat in a non-halal restaurant. While the halal issue has been present for all generations of Min kao Han, today’s declining Han sensitivity to Muslim practices makes it a more constraining social barrier for young Uighurs than it was for earlier generations.

The Classroom Experience

Despite different experiences in each generation of Min kao Han, the classroom is one place where they share common ground; regardless of larger issues and temporal context, as minority children in Han schools, they all encountered similar social and academic difficulties. While the researcher rarely encounters childhood accounts from elderly Min kao Han, anecdotes from both working adults and their children are easy to compile, and display astonishing similarity.

One of the biggest problems that Min kao Han students encounter is a feeling that they must work twice as hard to keep pace with Han classmates. As one acquaintance explained, she felt herself constantly inadequate. Even when she graduated first in her class, she still harboured insecurity over her academic performance and believed that her tests were graded differently. It did not help that when the top final exam scores were posted, hers were written first on the list in font a quarter the size of the second and third place Chinese names. She explained that because of the different font and the way the poster was hung, her initial impression was that the Han student who had placed second was in fact first, and that she had not placed at all. Nearly ten years later, her Han teacher apologized to her for this particular incident. Though well-meant, the apology reinforced her suspicion that the slight had indeed been intentional.

Another problem echoed by many Min kao Han is a feeling of isolation in the classroom. Upon first entering school, these children are faced with the significant social barrier of a new language. They are often slow to catch the jokes and banter of their classmates, and, for them, following lessons poses an even greater struggle. In addition to learning the characters (which many Chinese children begin studying at age three or four), they also face having to pick up Chinese grammatical structure and cultural nuance. The extra workload, which consumes much of what would have been leisure time, accompanied by communication problems when interacting with their Han peers, leaves many of them isolated in the classroom, and too consumed with homework after class to lead normal social lives.
One young man I encountered in Urumqi had initially been enrolled in Han school, but by age seven his parents had removed him to the local Uighur school. In the Chinese class he had become morose and uncommunicative, had not made friends and was terrified of his teachers. According to both his own and his parents' accounts, after only one semester in the Uighur class, he had undergone a social metamorphosis. By the time he reached high school, he was the class monitor as well as the captain of several sports teams. Today he is outgoing and confident, although his command of Mandarin is only fair. Another Min kao Han acquaintance, who has been very successful in his career, is having his daughter educated in a Uighur school. Though this choice seems to deny her the same employment advantages that the father has been afforded, when asked about his reasons for avoiding the Chinese schools the father explained that his daughter has always been a talkative, confident and outgoing child, and he could not bring himself to subject her to what he himself had gone through in the Han school system. He confided that it had taken him years to feel secure and capable, and was convinced that the Chinese classroom was soul-destroying for nearly all Uighur children who entered it. To compensate, he is teaching his daughter Chinese at home. Urumqi is a primarily Han city and he takes advantage of every opportunity (short of the Han school) to expose the girl to the Chinese language. In this way he hopes to achieve a balance in his daughter's education, for in his view, the social and psychological cost of Chinese education outweighs the advantages.

Finally, there is the problem of illiteracy. This can be illiteracy in Uighur, in Chinese, or in both languages. It is difficult to determine the extent of this problem, but I have encountered at least three young Uighurs who have completed their education in the Han school system and are only partially literate in Chinese. Furthermore, as was explained previously, most Min kao Han never learn to read and write the Uighur script, though most can speak comfortably. Thus, failure to properly learn written Chinese results in a student who is illiterate or only partially literate in both of these two languages. I have encountered one Min kao Han student who has taught himself the Uighur script and, after finishing college, was attempting to reinsert himself into Min kao Min society. Unfortunately, he was still unemployed sixteen months after graduation. He lacked connections in the Uighur community to find work there, and his facility in Mandarin was insufficient to allow him admission into Chinese work environments. Another former student (who had made no attempt to learn Uighur script) was having little luck finding work in the Chinese community. He attributed his unemployment to the institutionalized exclusion of non-Chinese minorities from private Chinese firms. Although this was undoubtedly a factor, his dubious competency in written Chinese was also likely to blame. In both cases, these boys had been raised with the belief that they would have employment advantages over their Min kao Min counterparts. These heightened expectations only made their unemployment more degrading. The classroom has thus figured large in the experience of the Min kao Han and has been pivotal in constructing their self-awareness. Constant struggle to keep up, coupled with the social isolation during formative years, have a damaging effect that limits the self-confidence of the Min kao Han.

The Place of the Min kao Han in Urumqi Society

Physical Niche

The city of Urumqi, like multi-cultural cities the world over, has distinctive ethnic neighbourhoods. Groups that have voluntarily segregated themselves include Hui, Pakistanis,
Russians and Uighurs. The populations of Kazak, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik in Urumqi are small and largely integrated into the Uighur community. With the exception of Tajik, their spoken languages are all mutually comprehensible, and the Uzbeks in particular are physically and culturally indistinguishable from the Uighurs. It is likely that the significance of this segregation in Urumqi has only recently developed. Until the 1980s the population would have been living entirely in assigned housing, so physical location would have had no bearing on the individual’s preference of locale and ethnic environment. It is also worth noting that the only housing units I visited where there was clear evidence of ethnic diversity were danwei,27 which are organizational remnants from the days of collectivization. As danwei give way to privately owned real estate, Urumqi is quickly becoming divided and ghettoized along ethnic/linguistic lines.

The Min kao Han are an interesting paradox in this pattern. There are a significant number of Min kao Han living in the Uighur districts, but they are also found throughout the Han portion of the city.28 This can be partially explained by the danwei system; however, there are also many Min kao Han who have chosen to purchase or rent in Han neighbourhoods. The Hui also show a similar pattern, and though there are certain enclaves towards which that community gravitates,29 many Hui choose to live dispersed among the Han. This, together with the seamless integration of the Turkic minority communities, suggests that language rather than ethnicity may in fact be the point of division.

While intermarriage with Han, and failure to follow halal practices remain major taboos for both Hui and Min kao Han, there is evidence that the Mandarin-speaking ethnic minorities living in Han districts practice a far more lax variant of Islam. Their dress is identical to that of the Chinese, and many do not attend mosque or take part in daily or Friday prayers. In most cases, physical features are the only way of distinguishing them from their Han neighbours.

Finally, the Min kao Han in Urumqi seem to be largely concentrated in government jobs rather than in the private sector. The government requires some employees with fluency in Mandarin and Uighur; however, there are very real limitations on how high minorities can climb within the administrative hierarchy. In the private sector, hiring is determined internally30 and the bias favouring Han is reflected in the mono-ethnic makeup of staff in most private businesses.31 Since government employment often includes housing, and because Min kao Han are more often hired by government agencies, they are thus more prevalent in the Han neighbourhoods than are the Min kao Min.

Psychological Niche

While many Min kao Han appear adjusted to life in the Chinese community, there are two traits that commonly find expression among members of this subgroup. The first is a lack of self-assurance, and the second is a strong hostility towards the Han. It could be said that these are qualities found throughout the Uighur population, and certainly would be predicted in any minority whose cultural identity is at risk of being absorbed by a majority population; however, the Min kao Han are theoretically advantaged in Xinjiang, and because of this one would initially expect social ease among them.

One Min kao Han woman, who has immigrated to Canada, explained that she never felt at home in China. Having grown up in Beijing in a completely Han environment, she did not feel particularly nostalgic about Uighur culture, and yet had never been fully included in Han society. She had no sentimental associations with the major Uighur holidays of the year, Korbanjie and Rosejie, and was equally unmoved by
Chinese holidays, such as Mid-Autumn Festival and Spring Festival. As she explained it, she was perpetually an outsider observing other people’s culture. Another Min kao Han acquaintance of mine is a well-known public figure who, despite her celebrity, is painfully shy. She had trained as a dancer in the National School for Minority Arts; however, since her graduation not even close family and friends had seen her dance. This may seem reasonable in a Western context, but in Uighur society dancing is an inescapable part of every social function, be it a house party, a dinner out or a wedding. I witnessed this woman decline invitations to dance at a wedding, though she was aware of the response this would elicit among the other partygoers. Several hundred wedding guests observed the whole incident, and the young woman was nearly in tears from embarrassment by the time we left. The impression made on the predominantly Min kao Min wedding guests was that she felt dancing with them beneath her. Almost without exception, Uighurs are not self-conscious when performing in the presence of their peers. For this reason, my friend’s behaviour was misunderstood; the result was that she was embarrassed, and the other guests took offence at her perceived slight.

A third Min kao Han associate was a professor at Xinjiang University. He finds that Uighur students are under-represented in universities, and that most minority students are Min kao Han. However, he claimed that the performance of Min kao Han students does not measure up to their Min kao Min counterparts. Ironically, he had observed that in graduate school, nearly all Uighur students are Min kao Min, and hypothesized that this was because the Min kao Han were too psychologically stifled in Han classrooms to succeed academically.

Anti-Han feeling is strong throughout the Uighur population, whether Min kao Min or Min kao Han. Conversations with Uighurs invariably turn to politics (even in situations where people do not know each other well), and few hesitate to air their views. However, these two groups have their own distinct expressions of hostility. While Min kao Min often talk of self-rule and the need to rid Xinjiang of the Han, the Min kao Han are often fatalistic, focusing instead on the impossibility of being free of Chinese rule and bemoaning a Han government that does not treat them as equals in their own territory. Hopelessness and belief that there is nothing to lose can result in desperate behaviour. All those executed in connection with the bus bombings and other violence that rocked Xinjiang during the late 1990s were young male Uighur university graduates. While this does not mean that they were necessarily Min kao Han, it is reasonable to assume that most of them were educated in Chinese. For all their talk of self-government, there is surprisingly little action taken by the Min kao Min. Perhaps they have too much hope for their personal futures and so avoid serious risks. In contrast, one could posit that the Min kao Han are more ready to sacrifice themselves because they do not see potential for personal success in the current system.

A poignant example of a Min kao Han who harboured strong hostility towards the Chinese was a male student who came to my attention in 2004. His was a rare case of a Uighur Min kao Han unable to speak the Uighur language fluently. He was in a Han class, but exhibited extremely anti-social behaviour with his classmates, alternating between sullenness and violent outbursts. He was open in his criticism of all things Chinese, and Han students generally avoided him. At school he was trying to reconnect with the Uighur culture from which he had been insulated during childhood, and sought inclusion in the community of Uighur students, specifically a group of young Min kao Min men who were the nexus of the Uighur social scene on campus. However, this group (and most of the Min kao Min students) were wary of him and did not appear
to return his friendly overtures. They tolerated him on some occasions, but routinely commented on his poor Uighur and went to great lengths to isolate him socially. Late in the first term, the police apprehended this boy after a Han student was injured in a dispute in the men’s residence. When he came back several months later, he was thin with a shaved head and a nervous twitch in one arm. Thereafter, he avoided all social contact. While this student’s experience is extreme in comparison to most Min kao Han, it highlights the dynamics and often dangerous tensions between the Han, Min kao Min, and Min kao Han communities.

The Future of the Min kao Han

The Min kao Han identity is young and their evolving role over three generations suggests that their future will be equally subject to change. The youngest generation of Min kao Han face challenges with which their predecessors did not have to contend. Based on my analysis, there are three major factors that will be instrumental in determining the nature of these challenges: globalization and the encroachment of Western culture; the steadily increasing numbers of Han living in Xinjiang; and reforms to the education system.

First, globalization and the opening of China are dramatically impacting the nature of the external influences entering Xinjiang. The Uighur community is increasingly having to contend with the intrusion of Westernized culture, in addition to the already pervasive Chinese culture. In my opinion, the impact of Western influence on Uighur culture is equally or more destructive than are Chinese influences. In clothing, music and social values, urban areas of Xinjiang are increasingly comparable to any other economic back-water on the globe. Uighur children flock to see Star Wars, listen to Eminem, line-up to eat franchised fast food from the increasingly ubiquitous Western outlets such as KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), and wear clothing that is modelled on styles worn by teenagers in the West. In many ways, Min kao Han are an especially efficient vector by which these influences infiltrate Uighur society. Because Western cultural influence is already evident in Han society, Min kao Han are on the receiving end of a double exposure to the West, first through Chinese media and second through Uighur media. Also, the Uighurs who receive positive coverage in the Chinese-controlled Uighur language media are usually Min kao Han and are strategically placed to promote their adopted values in the Min kao Min community.

Ironically, the Uighurs tend to be largely ambivalent to the threat of Western culture, and the focus of their nationalistic hostility remains the perceived physical and cultural intrusion of the Han. And contrary to the reality of the Western world’s increasing economic ties with China, there is even widespread belief among Uighurs that the West is putting pressure on China to improve conditions in Xinjiang, and to end human rights violations against minorities in the area. Despite the obvious impact of Western and Chinese culture on the Uighur identity, the Min kao Han remain the preferred scapegoats of the Min kao Min community. They are the butt of jokes, and target of sharp criticism behind closed doors. They are labelled traitors and sell-outs, and on many occasions I observed intense hostility verbalized against them. Retaliation by the Uighur community against the Min kao Han (rather than against either the Han or the Western community) is likely an attractive outlet because of this group’s physical proximity and perceived political and social weakness.

It is difficult to tell what the future trend in Uighur intra-ethnic relations will be. Uighurs harbour a strong dislike for the Bush administration, though theirs is a significantly milder hostility than that found in other Muslim communities worldwide. If Uighur animosity
toward the West were to grow, it could distract them from their current feud with the Han. This would almost certainly make the position of the Min kao Han more comfortable, as their transgression is association with the Han, not with the West. On the other hand, if relations with the West were to grow stronger, the Uighurs might see it as a vantage point from which to step-up their conflict with the Han. In that case the Min kao Han could find their position even more precarious than it is at present.

The second factor affecting young Uighurs is Han migration to Xinjiang. While the immigration rate is not increasing as dramatically as it did during the 1960s and 1970s, Han numbers continue to grow. In 1949, the Han in Xinjiang numbered approximately 300,000 and made up roughly 7% of the province’s population.34 1990 census data put Han numbers at 7.5 million, or at nearly 38% of Xinjiang’s population.35 However, this data, courtesy of the Chinese government, is somewhat misleading as it fails to include employees and families of the Production and Construction Corp (estimated to be 2.5 million), nor members of the People’s Liberation Army (estimated to be 1 million).36 If these groups are included, and continuing immigration is factored in, the current Han population of Xinjiang is estimated as being closer to a high of 12 million,37 making them, realistically speaking, an absolute majority in the province. The Han are increasingly moving into areas of the economy and geography traditionally dominated by the Uighurs. Naturally, this has resulted in friction between the groups, readily observed in the escalating inter-ethnic violence through the 1990s.38 At present, overt violence appears to have been suppressed. Government crackdowns in the late 1990s were severe, and imprisonments and executions of Uighurs by CCP authorities are still fresh in the minds of the Uighur community. However, isolated incidents of ethnic violence continue to occur frequently, especially among young men. Though this obviously relates more to Han–Uighur relations than to the place of the Min kao Han, tensions between these two ethnic communities invariably have repercussions for those culturally caught in the middle. Both the Han and the Min kao Min retaliate socially for episodes of violence, and as the Min kao Han are easily accessible to both groups they take the brunt of the fallout. Therefore, the direction in which ethnic relations develop will have a very significant impact on both the position and self-awareness of the Min kao Han in Xinjiang society.

A third factor influencing young Uighurs is that the education system in Xinjiang is on the brink of a massive overhaul. Within the next five years, the Chinese government is planning to institute Mandarin as the only language of instruction for all classrooms across the province. This, in effect, would render every Uighur child a Mandarin speaker, if not an actual Min kao Han. All children will thus be directly exposed to propaganda and cultural indoctrination in the Chinese language, relieving some of the current pressure on Min kao Han children. However, the government is encountering problems with the implementation of this plan, not the least of which is a shortage of qualified teachers. At present Min kao Min teachers are rushing to take the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK), a standardized test of Mandarin proficiency, in order to meet the new classroom language requirements. As with the experience of post-secondary instructors a few years ago, those who cannot meet the new standards will be faced with losing their jobs. One young woman I met was a high school math teacher who, after failing her first attempt at the HSK, was frantic over her employment prospects. She did not feel she would meet the new standard, even if she were to rewrite the test, and was well aware that she would likely be removed from her teaching post within the next few years. This was in Urumqi where Mandarin is commonly spoken even by minorities who have not been educated in that language.
By all accounts, concern over implementation of the new rules in rural areas is even more worrying than in urban centres. In many smaller towns and villages there are almost no minority people who have intensively studied Chinese, and finding qualified instructors will be next to impossible. While teachers could conceivably be brought in from other provinces to pick up these classes, it is unlikely that any Han instructors with decent qualifications will be attracted to job opportunities teaching minority children in rural Xinjiang. As such, the language reforms in the education system will probably not cause any immediate transformation in the language use of the population. Instead it is likely that the initial result will be a general decline in education and literacy levels among rural minority students. In all probability, fluency in Mandarin will become synonymous with education, and only gradually, if ever, a means of communication for Uighurs in all parts of Xinjiang. While there will still be Uighur parents who enrol their children in Han schools, these changes in the education system will almost certainly make the socio-cultural distinctions between Min kao Min and Min kao Han less discernable.

**Conclusion**

There is no official forum for the open discussion of ethnic issues in Xinjiang, but a ubiquitous unofficial discourse on the subject brings out strong sentiments from people on all sides of the debate, with few who live in Xinjiang remaining neutral. Many researchers have commented on the rigidity of the ethnic lines that divide the population, and the near perfect agreement on political issues that is observed within each ethnic group. Although I agree that ethnicity is a crucial means of identification and association in Xinjiang, I worry that in focusing exclusively on ethnicity we risk oversimplifying these inter-group dynamics. While it is true that nearly all minorities feel hostility towards the Han, among ethnic Uighurs there are significant differences in the way this hostility is manifested. This variability within the Uighur population shows a strong correlation with educational background and language use. For that reason, language of communication (as an indicator of education) must also be considered. The Uighur Min kao Han clearly illustrate the significance of language in Xinjiang’s politics. Their experiences within the Han and Min kao Min communities demonstrate that ethnicity is not the only significant means of group identification. Their social, religious and linguistic alienation proves that blood alone is not enough to guarantee inclusion in a group, or to predict political expression.

The social middle ground in Urumqi society occupied by the Min kao Han leaves them with a foot in two worlds—one of the traditional Uighur, the other of the Han Chinese—but full inclusion in neither. It is only recently that there have been large enough numbers of Min kao Han for them to begin forming a third community. While the growing solidarity between previously isolated Min kao Han will no doubt change the nature of their position and self-image, forces internal to the group are secondary in influence to external factors such as changes in ethnic demographics, the intrusion of Western culture, and language reforms in the education system. Up until now, the Min kao Han have been shaped primarily by actions and attitudes in the society around them, and time is required for them to raise self-awareness to a level where they can take control of their identity development. This process will undoubtedly begin in urban centres like Urumqi, where Min kao Han are most numerous.

Change is as inevitable for the Min kao Han as it is for the external forces that help to form their identity. Whether the future will see the Min kao Han evolving into true intermediaries between the Han and the Uighurs is not certain. There are far too many variables acting in and on the community to know what form their participation in Xinjiang society will take in
the future. The recent superficial pax in Xinjiang does not mean that the Uighurs are coming to terms with their Han government. If anything, tension below the surface is even greater because of the lack of emotional outlets, and though the Chinese seem oblivious to it, the minority populations’ lack of hope for the future poses a very serious threat to regional security. The youngest generation of Min kao Han will be confronted with greater and more complex social tensions than previous generations had to face. For now they remain office interpreters, government mouthpieces, second-class to the Han and despised by other Uighurs. However, it is difficult to know whether in the future they will become leaders to the Uighur people and a threat to the Chinese, a tool for reconciliation, or simply pawns who remain external and of little significance to the main conflict. When they come to see themselves as an entity separate from other groups, we will likely begin to understand the future direction of ethnic politics in Xinjiang.

NOTES

1. This paper in its original version was presented at the “2005 Middle East and Central Asia Politics, Economics, and Society Conference”, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA, 8–10 September 2005.


4. Turkic speaking minorities include the Uighur, Kazak, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tartar.

5. This term is commonly used in older texts written before or up to the early 1900s. It was meant as an ethnonym and seems to encompass all the ethnic groups in the region that speak Turkic dialects: today’s Uighurs, Kazaks, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Tartars. It is unclear as to whether or not those who used it intended to include the Tajik (a non-Turkic minority and language), but it is likely that the Tajik were seen historically as being of Persian and non-Turkic ancestry.

6. These changes caused major disruptions within university departments, as professors who were not qualified to conduct classroom instruction in Chinese were faced with a choice between early retirement or the loss of their teaching positions. The past few years have seen a wave of ethnic minority instructors at all levels of the education system scrambling to pass the HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) in order to demonstrate competence in the Chinese language.

7. Many non-Uighur minority students must complete the final years of their education in Uighur schools. For example, a young Tajik student at Xinjiang University completed his primary education in a Tajik school, his high school education in a Uighur school, and finally was pursuing his undergraduate studies in Mandarin.

8. These are my own observations and deduction of the situation in Urumqi’s Uighur community, and are also supported in the data collected by Emily Hannum and Yu Xie, “Ethnic stratification in northwest China: occupational differences between Han Chinese and national minorities”, Demography, Vol. 35, No. 3, 1998, pp. 323–334, 329. It should be noted, however, that the research of Hannum and Xie was looking more at urban–rural and ethnic patterns than at linguistic facility. Furthermore, the data they were working with was predominantly collected between 1980 and 1990.


10. In assessing demographics of agricultural workers, Hannum and Xie (ibid.) failed to differentiate between the larger more commercialized farming operations (which are generally more profitable and primarily employ Han) and smallholding farms (which are run by ethnic minorities).

11. In China, all party members, students, many government employees, and family members of these groups are prohibited from participating in religious services or attending religious events. In Xinjiang, this includes wearing headscarves, and taking part in prayer or in any of the religious practices associated with the major Muslim holidays, including fasting in Ramadan. Last year three professors at Xinjiang University were each fined a month’s salary after lights were seen in their apartments during the early hours of the morning. It was assumed that they were eating breakfast before sunrise, which is the normal preparation for a day of fasting.
12. Fluency in Chinese is not always achieved in the Min kao Han population. This issue will be discussed in greater detail later in the paper.

13. Many overseas Uighurs are worried about Chinese government spies infiltrating their communities, and a family can find itself socially outcast if rumours spread that a member is connected too closely with the Chinese government. As it stands, it is not uncommon for ex-pat Uighurs returning to visit family in Xinjiang to be picked up by the Chinese Public Security Bureau and held for questioning about activities in the Uighur community abroad.

14. I have come across only one paper for which the author used official government channels to collect data. He was examining Han/Uighur relations in Urumqi and, among other factors, was looking at the frequency of mixed-race marriages. Although I do not have data to contradict his findings, I feel that it is telling that in his three weeks of data collection in Urumqi (his “random” subjects were selected by government-assigned research assistants), he encountered seven mixed-race marriages. In my 20 months spent in the same city I did not encounter a single mixed-race marriage, though I heard of one such couple, who I was told had moved to Beijing.

15. This segregation affects seating, but not dancing. Men and women share the dance floor, and men do invite women to dance.


17. Uighurs who left Xinjiang to pursue education often went to Moscow or Central Asian centres such as Tashkent and Almaty. Further evidence of Soviet influence in the region could be seen in the local education material, much of which was produced in the Soviet Union. As a result, in 1949, many “Chinese” Uighurs were already literate in the Romanized phonetic script developed for them in the USSR. The CCP initially adopted this script as the official written form for the Uighur language. This meant that Communist propaganda in Uighur was readily available for distribution in the province, and that teaching materials were easy to acquire. However, during the Sino-Soviet split, the CCP eradicated this script fearing that it promoted cross border contact between Uighurs in Xinjiang and those living in Russian-controlled territories. Today, Uighurs in China use a phonetic writing system based on the Arabic script.

18. This was an integral component of the Production and Construction Corporation’s (PCC) purpose. The PCC is a paramilitary group that was originally composed of GMD regiments stranded in Xinjiang after Chiang Kaishek’s retreat to Taiwan. They had surrendered to the Communists and became a CCP volunteer brigade for construction and maintenance of public works in Xinjiang.


20. The Han who are earlier arrivals in Xinjiang often lay the blame for deteriorating Han–Uighur relations on the newer Han immigrants.

21. At a school where I was employed, I was given this in explanation to my question concerning why they had a policy of hiring only Han teachers and discouraged minority students.

22. On one occasion this was repeated to me by a helpful cab driver who was very sorry to learn that as a foreigner I had rented an apartment in the Uighur district. He assumed I had been unfamiliar with the ethnic geography of the city at the time of my arrival and had mistakenly taken an apartment in the Uighur neighbourhood of Yan’an lu.


24. Though I have had some difficulty finding written documentation of this, several Min kao Han have told me that the earliest Han arriving in their communities had made very favourable impressions on the local Muslims by following halal dietary practices.

25. It is common practice for teachers to hit students who answer incorrectly, and this friend explained that much of his anxiety in class was brought on by fear of being singled out to answer questions.

26. Class monitors are selected by teachers based on leadership skill and academic standing.

27. This assigned compound housing is attached to a specific government work unit (office, agency, factory, etc.). All government employees are theoretically eligible to receive this subsidized housing, though shortages are a recurring problem.

28. The Uighur district is composed of two small neighbourhoods, Erdaqiao and the west end of Yan’an lu. These are located next to each other in the extreme south end of the city. The Han portion of the city comprises well over 80% of Urumqi’s area.

29. One such example is the Hui community just south of Nanmen, where Hui mosques and shops are clustered together. This neighbourhood overlaps with the Uighur area of Erdaqiao.

30. In the private sector, nearly all large companies are owned and operated by Han Chinese. There are a few exceptions, including a very successful chain of grocery stores called Arman; however, Uighur businesses tend to stay within the Uighur community and this inevitably limits their growth potential.
31. I have encountered Uighur university students who have attended the campus job fairs only to be told at each booth that the company was not hiring minorities. There is no attempt to conceal these policies, and what little affirmative action exists is only applicable to government jobs.
32. This is with the noted exception of many elderly Min kao Han.
33. These views were expressed to me during my stays in Xinjiang in 2002–2003 and 2004–2005. Lending credibility to this theory is the recent release of Rabia Kadir, a Uighur businesswoman who had been in prison for well over a decade. Her early release occurred just before the arrival of US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice on a state visit to China. It appears that Ms. Rice had been an advocate for Ms. Kadir. After being released Ms. Kadir immediately relocated to Chicago where she is now living with her husband.
37. Ibid.
38. Many different sources give examples of these conflicts, however, it is in Arienne M. Dwyer’s paper, “The Xinjiang conflict: Uyghur identity, language policy, and political discourse”, East-West Centre Washington, Policy Studies 15, Washington, DC: East-West Centre, 2005, pp. 4–5, that an overall increase in frequency of small-scale violent incidents is documented.
Usurping the Nation: Cyber-Leadership in the Uighur Nationalist Movement

KRISTIAN PETERSEN

Abstract

This paper surveys the increasing support from the Uighur community for the creation of an independent nation, “East Turkistan”, from what is today the Xinjiang province in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and the exposure this has received in global news outlets. The PRC’s often brutal suppression of Uighur nationalism within China has forced the Uighur diaspora community leaders to more forcefully speak of ethnic Uighur rights and act as the voice of all Uighurs. The result of the global exposure to the East Turkistan plea, mainly through the use of the World Wide Web, has been the reification of the Uighur identity. In this study, by examining published materials and websites, I have concluded that while claiming to represent all Uighurs, these outlets only embody a privileged community. I have also established in this study the affects of the Internet on the Uighur nationalist movement. Overall, as with nearly all nations and nation-states worldwide, the physical borders of Xinjiang do not correlate to a unified cultural Uighur identity. Furthermore, the policies implemented by the PRC have de facto encouraged the creation of a borderless national identity that is being used by the Uighur leaders for deliberate political goals. As such, the leaders of Uighur organizations, and intellectuals and activists have led the way in determining this modern Uighur character through the use of the World Wide Web.

Introduction

Uighur nationalism has gained an international audience due to global scepticism and Muslims’ objections towards the inadequate political and social circumstances within Central Asia, which, I argue, should include what is known today as Xinjiang, or the north-western region of China proper, where the majority of ethnic Uighurs reside. The fear that fundamentalist Islam will blossom in such an environment of discontent has led the region’s governments to focus their attention on dissidents’ conduct and largely ignore prevailing problems, leading to condemnation by the local populations. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a good example of this approach. Their anxieties about “terrorism” have overshadowed any attempts to improve the lives of the disenfranchised and impoverished Uighur communities of Xinjiang. For this reason, the call for an independent Uighur nation, a free “East Turkistan”, has provided grounds for concern for many officials of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and outside observers. The contingency of an independent Uighur nation relies on the role of Uighur leaders—many of whom are among the diaspora—in implementing this aspiration.

If there is to be any prospect of the development of an independent Uighur nation, it will be necessary for the Uighurs to have a unified group identity representative of the goals of the majority of the community, based on a sense of allegiance and citizenship.
to a native land. The PRC’s suppression of Uighur nationalism within China has forced the diaspora community leaders to represent the entire population to the rest of the world and act as a voice for all Uighurs. Global exposure to the East Turkistan plea, mainly through the use of the World Wide Web, has resulted in the reification of Uighur identity. Achieving the goal of a free East Turkistan may only be possible if there is a single voice for the Uighur community; therefore, the diaspora leaders have seized and shaped the Uighur identity to use it as a unifier to reach their desired goal of increased cultural and political rights, and even outright secession from China.

As with nearly all nations and nation-states worldwide, overall, the physical borders of Xinjiang do not correlate with a unified cultural Uighur identity, but policies implemented by the PRC have forced a minority among the Uighur community to create a monolithic national identity that is being used for deliberate political goals. For the leaders of the cyber-Uighur movement, the various identities of the people of Xinjiang have been overlooked in order to achieve their goals. As such, the image that has been projected by leaders of organizations, and by intellectuals and activists, predominantly through the creation of websites, has determined the nature of the modern Uighur character that is being shared with the larger global community.

The Uighur

The modern Uighur identity, which is so consequential to Uighur nationalism and their call for independence, is based on an “imagined”—a la Benedict Anderson’s seminal work—sense of self-unity, established primarily by political designations. The term Uighur, itself, was generally not in use for 500 years prior to the twentieth century. Currently it is employed by the CCP as a name for one of China’s national minorities. Many modern Uighurs, however, have adopted this appellation to garner a shared platform for achieving their objectives. Historically, the dialogical identities of the indigenous peoples located in the Ili Valley and the Tarim, Turpan, and Dzungarian Basins have been fluid. Depending on whom these people were interacting with, they stressed various aspects of their character. While the history of the various peoples referred to as “Uighur” is too comprehensive to explore here, it should be noted that the self-identity of these communities was in direct opposition to an Islamic character, and after the conversion of Turpan to Islam, in the fifteenth century, the name was abandoned in general use. Therefore, “[t]he re-emergence of the label ‘Uyghur’ that the Chinese applied to these diverse groups was arguably inappropriate, since it had last been used almost half a millennium previously to describe the largely Buddhist population of the Turpan basin.” Although the identities of the ancient “Uighurs” and modern Uighurs are not fungible, the leaders of the cyber-Uighur movement have portrayed their community as the legatee of this heritage. Their presentation of “Uighur” history lies in the interstitial area between history and myth. The relationship between these two groups of people is plausible but still equivocal. However, to assert that the inhabitants of Eastern Turkistan thought of themselves as a unified nation of people called “Uighurs” is erroneous. The modern Uighur identity is still in its inchoate stages and by no means has invertebrate groundings. It is continuing to form in relation to the ineluctable consequences of the modern nation state and the indelible outcomes of policies implemented by the CCP. Although, this identity is not only imposed from above, the indigenous response
has resulted in its reification, which is readily accessible to the Western observer through the World Wide Web.

The institutionalization of the Uighur name results from the initial goal of unification based on the CCP’s political agenda. “[T]he original creation of national groups was a strategic temporary recognition of ethnic difference in order to solicit support in the revolutionary process, it later led to the hardening of ethnic boundaries—the creation of identities, which were supposed to be only provisional”. The creation of several ethnic designations for the various minorities of China early in the twentieth century by the CCP, was a deliberate attempt to discourage a pan-Turkic movement. When dealing with the multifarious peoples of China, state control is enhanced if those under its command are divided into accepted categories of ethnicity and tradition. However, this created identity may manifest in the real world with results that are opposite to the creators’ intentions. The creation of the Uighur minzu, or nationality, by the CCP caused the various peoples in the oases of East Turkistan to become Uighurs. This is because the CCP allotted them, as official minorities, certain rights that were beneficial to their livelihood. This designation “... was gladly revived by the 6 million oases-dwelling Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as their ethnonym, since this acceptance brought with it recognition by the state, as well as an autonomous region”. And now this label has become the vehicle for rallying support in order to establish a Uighur nation. Uighurs, in Xinjiang and abroad, have utilized this appellation as the basis for demanding rights and freedoms that are not being granted by the CCP.

The Uighur Diaspora and the Formation of a Cyber Community

Within China, the CCP is capable of keeping a watchful eye over the actions of the Uighurs and quickly punishing any of those they disapprove. Turkic people from Xinjiang that have been able to migrate to other countries, both before and after the commencement of the PRC, are more effective in their efforts for establishing a free East Turkistan. After several stages of migration, relatively large numbers of Uighurs have moved throughout Asia, Western Europe, North America, Australia, and Turkey. While it is unclear exactly how many Uighurs are now living in exile, a reliable estimation of this population is around 500,000—roughly 7% of the Uighur population of Xinjiang. From outside China, the new leaders in the East Turkistan movement have been able to promote their plea to the rest of the world. Until the late 1970s Uighur transnationalism was generally ineffective against the CCP and little was known worldwide of their predicament. This was due to the inability of other governments to apply pressure on the CCP and the limited media that was available to the diasporic leaders of social movements.

The global community of the twenty-first century has given Uighurs a stronger ability to express their views and obtain their objectives. The inception of the Internet and the World Wide Web has allowed Uighurs to reach a wider audience, distributing information on the situation in Xinjiang and providing avenues for expressing their nationalist interests. There are now many international organizations based on Uighur nationalism worldwide, in places such as Istanbul, Munich, Melbourne, New York, and Washington, DC. Cyberspace has linked the small Uighur communities throughout the world and allowed them to overcome geographical borders and political censorship. The cyber world has become the new outlet for these leaders to promote their unified goal for the Uighurs in establishing a free East Turkistan.

The accessibility of these websites sheds some light on the audiences they are intended for. Generally, access to many of these sites is prohibited in some of the Central Asian
countries and China. The Central Asian states have committed to work together with China in fighting any Uighur separatist activities within their countries. Separatist actions have often been grouped together with any attempt to present information on Uighur human rights or identity. Many of the new Central Asian leaders have teamed up with Beijing to prevent any Uighur organizations from being established within their borders. Even without these obstacles, access to the Internet in Central Asia is still constrained because of limited facilities and user expenses. Within China the demotic population of Uighurs largely does not have access to Uighur content websites either. The Chinese authorities have employed various methods to prevent dissenting opinions from entering its borders, such as blocking, monitoring, and filtering of websites and email; government-sponsored hacking; and online propaganda. This has left many Uighurs in China who do have access to the Internet unable to view the websites of organizations directed towards independence or with surrogate representations of Uighur history. However, informational Uighur websites are accessible to individuals within China. Nevertheless, these are also subject to the CCP’s interpretation of unbiased information. Therefore, many Uighurs within Xinjiang are even unaware that such actions are taking place outside of China’s borders.

In Western countries, access to the Internet is relatively inexpensive, unrestricted, and convenient. This is why most websites dealing with Xinjiang and the Uighurs are written in Western languages. Websites that are written exclusively in Uighur are viewed less frequently and are not as influential in the formation of the distinct identity that is being portrayed on the sites accessible by Westerners. It is apparent that the anticipated audience for these sites is educated Uighur émigrés, and the general Western population or legislators who may be interested, or apt to be interested, in Uighur advocacy and human rights issues. The majority of these websites have become the authoritative voices of East Turkistan because they are the most accessible outlets informing the Western constituency because of their use of the English language. The formation of a concrete Uighur identity that has been expressed through the descriptions of history, culture, and peoples of the Xinjiang area on many websites is meant to foster and shape the general understanding of Uighurs for outsiders. Therefore, a monolithic identity is what a solicitous Westerner will glean from these sites. This conception of “Uighurness” reinforces the suggestion that all Uighurs are aligned in their goals and desire a free “East Turkistan”.

These websites have also become advantageous for Uighur émigrés and their organizations. They have also allowed the diaspora community of Uighurs to communicate and network with each other across many geographical regions. Most websites have links to other informational sites and/or web pages of other organizations pursuing Uighur causes. Message boards have provided an outlet for members of the community to express views that would be illegal in communist China. These allow not only the organizers, but also the benefactors and constituents of the Uighur community to coordinate events and activities and establish an affable cyber community. They permit the diasporic community to be included in events around the world by reporting news from memorials and demonstrations and informing community members of how they can participate in such events.

The various symbols used on the sites indicate how Uighurs want to portray their modern identity and what their goals are. These sites always supply maps of the region labelled “East Turkistan” or “Uighuristan” and often employ contemporary Xinjiang maps with this classification. In one case the word Xinjiang is visibly crossed out, expressing their contempt for the mislabelling of the region. This action directly
opposes China’s authority over the area and affirms their belief in the region’s legitimate title. Most of the sites have flags from the East Turkistan Republic (ETR). This shows their support of an independent Uighur nation, recalling the memory of the short-lived Uighur state of the 1940s.

These websites also portray Uighur history in an analogous fashion. The nomenclature utilized within these sites attempts to distance the Uighurs and East Turkistan both geographically and culturally from China. These sites also present the Uighurs as the original inhabitants of the region, thereby legitimizing their entitlement to disclose the authentic record of their people and further confirming their interpretation of history. The main goal of these cyber-narratives is to demonstrate that the Uighurs have been a unified people with a sense of community and allegiance to a native land for countless generations. This view undermines the official accounts of history by the CCP that claim that this area has been an integral part of China since the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). It also validates their acrimony and indignation at Chinese rule over the Turkic people. Since “Uyghurs and Han Chinese are not of the same race”, and “records show that the Uyghurs have a history of more than 4000 years in East Turkistan”, and furthermore that “East Turkistan is a part of Central Asia, not of China”, Uighurs believe that they are the appropriate historians of East Turkistan.19 These assertions, stated on several Uighur websites, are unequivocal attempts to emphasize the legitimacy of Uighur versions of their current situation, based on the historical disparity between official CCP history and Uighur accounts. This presentation emphasizes China’s misrepresentation of history, which also insinuates their distortion of the Uighurs’ contemporary state of affairs. If the Uighur leaders are persuasive in this accord, they could win over numerous advocates in their struggle for a free nation.

**Uighur Websites**

A detailed examination of the content of some Uighur websites will demonstrate how they are shaping the modern Uighur identity and presenting the general public with a specific interpretation of Uighurs. Two of the most vehement ambassadors for the Uighur community, based in the United States, are the Uyghur Information Agency (UIA) and the Uyghur American Association (UAA). These two organizations advocate Uighur civil liberties within China and promote cultural preservation. The UIA has approached this goal by “… disseminating accurate and timely information about the Uyghur people and Eastern Turkestan in the world”.20 Because Chinese sources have generally misinformed the public about the Uighurs by only providing information that facilitates their continued governance over Xinjiang, “… there are a lot of mistakes, misrepresentation and misconception about the history and current situation of Uyghur people as well as what they want for their future”.21 The foremost objective of the UIA is “… to correct the media prejudice and give the voiceless Uyghurs a real voice in the world”.22 According to its official website, to help achieve this goal the UIA will

… provide news from the international media relevant to the Uyghur people and the future of Eastern Turkestan. UIA will objectively present the current human rights situation and the history of the Uyghur people as well as Eastern Turkistan, including China’s takeover, annexation, and continuous colonization of the region.23

The Uyghur American Association was created in 1998 “… to serve the needs of the growing community [in the USA] and to represent the collective voice of the Uyghurs
back home".\textsuperscript{24} The UAA has also initiated the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), which is reportedly “dedicated to researching, and exposing human rights abuses committed against Uyghurs in East Turkestan”. The UHRP contends that it “does not take a position on independence for East Turkistan, but instead focuses its goals on promoting human rights and democracy for Uyghurs and others living in East Turkistan”.\textsuperscript{25}

None of these organizations overtly state their endorsement for an independent nation but their support for East Turkistan is clear. By utilizing this term they are refuting the PRC’s governance over the region and eliciting the memory of the East Turkistan republics, by which they are ultimately declaring their advocacy of a free Uighur homeland. And by claiming to speak for “... the collective voice of the Uyghurs in East Turkistan”\textsuperscript{26} they are proclaiming this position for the entire community. The diaspora Uighurs who have developed these websites have seen the ease with which they are able to create a unified population with a single goal of independence. The Uyghur Information Agency declares that with the introduction of the Internet:

\begin{quote}
... the way and the speed of our communication has been revolutionized in the world. Internet has provided the best forum for all of us to receive and disseminate information without borders. Therefore, UIA hopes to tear down the wall of silence and unveil the hidden truth about the Uyghur people and the land they live in.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

By revealing the shrouded truth of the Uighurs, these organizations have presented the world with the exclusive knowledge of what appears to be an insider’s view. However, the view presented in this community declaration is not necessarily the view of all Uighurs. The “silence” of the native community has allowed the diasporic community to create an image that reflects their particular goals without necessarily being fundamentally in harmony with all or the majority of Uighurs’ positions.

A popular site among Uighurs is meshrep.com. Meshrep is a cultural gathering that is shared by most Turkic peoples of Central Asia. Regional variations and customs occur but this event is generally universal. The website contends:

\begin{quote}
We named this page as “meshrep.com” from the perspective of introducing Uighur culture, art, music, jokes and songs to those who are interested in Uighur tradition and culture and hoping our effort will offer however small the connection between Uighur and a larger audience in the western world.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

This site’s presentation is situated in a Uighur custom, advancing the notion that it is representative of how Uighurs think and what they believe. While it consists of a portion of the population’s views it is most characteristic of those who have developed and contributed to its composition—an educated and prosperous assemblage of Uighurs. The site is known to have “hosted heated debates among Uighurs and Uighur organizations from different parts of the world”.\textsuperscript{29} It also provides frequently updated information about Xinjiang and Uighurs that substantiate the petition for an independent nation. This site also supplies a calendar of important events in Uighur history, and expresses what the creators of the site believe to be important in being a Uighur. The people and events they have chosen to display embody what they believe to be “Uighurness”. Meshrep.com has profiled selected people such as Uighur authors Abdurehim Otkur and Turghun Almas; and reported on the arrest and sentencing of famous Uighur entrepreneur Rebiya Kadeer; the inauguration of the East Turkistan
Government in Exile established in Washington, DC; and the establishment of the East Turkistan Islamic Republic and the Eastern Turkistan Republic. According to meshrep.com:

The Chinese government wants to erase the history of Eastern Turkistan Revolution, and makes everything possible to the Uighur youth to forget about the great event. It is up to us whether the Chinese communists succeed in this. Let us try to learn and remember every single moment of our history. People without history is (sic) a people without future.30

But the distillation of nationalistic history is selective in what is expressed about the past, in regards to one’s future goals. By emphasizing these key events and figures, a distinct view of the past is used to guide the Uighur community into the future. By remembering the most important events and individuals that exemplify what is desired for the Uighur future, meshrep.com is able to direct their interpretation of the modern Uighur identity and shape the goals of the entire community.

One of the most obvious supporters for a Uighur nation is the East Turkistan National Freedom Center (ETNFC). This organization is headed by Anwar Yusuf Turani who since 1995 has worked diligently to raise the consciousness of the history, culture, and people of East Turkistan and the awareness of the plea for an independent nation to the American public. Through the years, Turani has written:

... newsletters, press releases, and letters that generated news coverage and national and international publicity on the plight of the Uyghur people in East Turkistan. In addition, he [has] briefed State Department officials, members of the Congress, national and international dignitaries, and various organizations and media outlets, providing them with ... information about China’s human rights violations including the Chinese occupation of his homeland, and the Chinese repression in East Turkistan.31

Turani’s opinions are lucidly expressed in his aims for the ETNFC. Along with like-minded Uighur émigrés, Turani has been able to establish the East Turkistan Government in Exile, assuming the title of Prime Minister. On September 14, 2004, Turani gave his inaugural address stating, “For years, the people of East Turkistan have wondered: does anyone hear them? Is there a voice abroad for East Turkistan? Is there any entity, a government, an authority that speaks for them? That wondering: that longing has ended. East Turkistan has found its voice one (sic) again”.32 This organization’s appeal to some in the USA has furthered the Uighurs’ cause, giving those who desire independence a gleam of hope. “We turn to the United States of America, as the leader of liberty, justice, and wisdom, hoping that [it] will recognize the just cause of freedom and independence of millions of East Turkistanis”, declares the website.33 But again, the silence of the Uighurs within “East Turkistan” allows those in the diaspora to, in this case, confidently promote and represent the hopes of millions of their ethnic counterparts in China.

Cyber-leadership and its Dual Goals

The role of the diasporic Uighur cyber-leadership has been twofold and interconnected: outside the Uighur community, and especially with Western governments and the international civil society, the objective has been to “enlist support, win recognition and promote solidarity for the cause of Eastern Turkestan independence”. And within the
Uighur community, the objective of the cyber-leadership has been to forge and preserve a real or imagined Uighur collective identity, “revive the memory of the two defunct Eastern Turkestan republics, and sustain Uygur culture and language”.  

For most citizens in the global community, these Internet representations embody the notion of “Uighurness”. Due to the dearth of accessible resources dedicated to the topic of Xinjiang and the Uighurs, the average person has few options in learning who Uighurs are and what they—or at least their cyber-leadership—want for their future. As China’s western regions become increasingly important in international affairs—largely due to underlying petroleum reserves and ethnic tensions—Western media will access these types of sites more frequently to inform their audiences of the situation and about the peoples of Xinjiang. As such, establishing websites with material on Uighurs has made leaders of organizations, and intellectuals and activists the ambassadors for East Turkistan.

The epiphenomenon of the global exposure to the Eastern Turkistan plea, through the use of the World Wide Web, has been the reification of the Uighur identity. Access to computers and the Internet, as well as knowledge of Western languages, makes the cyber-Uighur movement an exclusive development. Still, while claiming to represent all “Uighurs”, these outlets only embody a privileged community. If the goal of a free East Turkistan is only possible when there is a single voice for the community then the diaspora leaders must seize the Uighur identity and use it as a unifier in order to reach their desired goal. The term Uighur has been adopted by this quorum as this bonding principle in order to create a significant antagonist against the CCP and its claims of jurisdiction over Xinjiang. By utilizing it, it is as if all physical limitations are severed to unite the community for a specific goal, which is the creation of an independent Uighur nation.

From the historical representations and present assertions of the unified Uighur character, it is apparent that there has been an appropriation of the modern Uighur identity. I am not able to attribute intentionality or premeditation in the determination of how these sites represent the Uighurs because Uighur intellectuals, from various geographical areas, stress different aspects that they feel contribute to the Uighur identity, often presenting the local oases history as Uighur history. The small privileged community that has been able to establish websites for the Western community may thus all reflect the collective memory of the modern Uighur—and Westernized—intellectual émigré, with the vast majority of Uighurs still separated by many factors. To state that the goal of all Uighurs is that of a free nation-state outside of China may well be over-asserting the wishes of most Uighurs who are only asking for more autonomy and cultural freedom. Furthermore, the modern Uighur identity deviates in many instances. There is division along religious lines, between competing Muslim Sufi traditions and also between non-Sufi factions. It is also important to recognize that many Uighurs have fixed territorial allegiances, either based on oases or place of origin, which also include linguistic discrepancies. Competing understandings of what it means to be Uighur and the inconsistency in basic objectives inhibits a large-scale social movement from occurring in Xinjiang or abroad. The many interpretations of what it means to be Uighur also undercuts the unification of the nationalist movement and enables the CCP to remain in control of Xinjiang.

The Internet has broadened the audience for understanding the Uighurs’ situation, however, and achieved the illusion that there is a single unified people, justified in their demand for an independent nation. The common features of Uighur websites, such as content, images, and implied goals, reinforce the notion of “Uighurness” to
the diasporic leaders. Kilic Kanat has perceptibly pointed out that “... the Internet plays an important role in the creation of a new Uyghur identity and fostering of nationalistic ideas among Uyghur migrant groups”. I contend, however, that this new identity is a false atavism from the Uighur past. The virtual cenotaph in honour of the rich past of the people of Eastern Turkistan and their homeland has been reconstructed in a manner that validates the link between them and modern Uighurs.

Today, this linkage between Uyghurs also plays an increasingly important role in the construction of a “diasporic Uyghur identity”. This new identity is much more Uyghur than “East Turkistani”. Although the name of the territory is hardly contested, Uyghur migrants identify themselves as Uyghurs rather than Eastern Turkistanis in virtual space.

Conclusion

While claiming to represent the Uighur populace the cyber-leaders have created a rarefied Uighur identity that is characteristic of the small elite émigré community. The Uighur websites’ presentation of their culture, history, and livelihood, while composed of features from reality, is expurgated in a manner that shepherds their desired goals. The Internet has become a crucial tool for the diasporic leaders of the Uighur independence movement, who have been able to usurp the modern Uighur identity and direct its goals in their desired direction. But, as previously stated, while some Uighurs would like an independent state, many others would enjoy more autonomy and freedom under the CCP. The polar representations of Uighurs by nationalists and official CCP outlets have made the World Wide Web a precarious place to learn about this community. As Nathan Light’s scholarly website has pointed out,

On the web it is difficult to get accurate information about Uyghur history and culture ... Many of the sources I have linked here are biased presentations, either assuming with the Chinese that what they call the Xinjiang (meaning “New Territory”) Uyghur Autonomous Region was always a part of China, or presenting the Uyghur nationalist view that there should be a separate Uyghur state. This makes these interesting materials to read, but highly rhetorical. The Xinjiang region is neither purely Uyghur, nor historically a part of China. It is more realistic to celebrate the diversity of Uyghur historical and cultural origins, rather than arguing that they have a unified culture and history, just as it is more realistic for Chinese to admit that China’s political ties to the region were weak until the Manchu conquest under the Qianlong Emperor in the eighteenth century.

Regardless of the accuracy of statements about the Uighurs, their leaders have used the Internet to rally the international community around their cause. While the physical borders of Xinjiang are not equivalent to a unified people within that region, the leaders abroad have used this identity as a platform for raising support and awareness for their cause. Although the cultural Uighur identity is varied, the backlash caused by the brutal policies employed by the CCP has created a national identity that is being used to achieve calculated political consequences. The original application of the ethnonym “Uighur” may have been a malapropism but it has become a crucial emblem for the leaders of the Uighur community who desire an independent East Turkistan.
NOTES

1. This paper in its original version was presented at the “Central Eurasian Studies Society Sixth Annual Conference”, Boston University, Boston, MA, 29 September–2 October 2005. I would like to thank Terry Kleeman, George Keyworth, Russell Hurt, and Britt Marlowe for their assistance on the revision of this paper. All opinions and mistakes are, of course, my own.


6. This measure was adopted from the nationality policy of the GMD, which was based on Stalin’s creation of ethnic categories in the USSR.


8. The first instance of an indigenous use of the term “Uighur” is usually attributed to a group of Jadi-dists called the Organization of Revolutionary Uyghur in 1921. See Joseph Fletcher, “China and Central Asia, 1368–1944”, in *Chinese World Order*, ed. John Fairbank, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968, pp. 206–224 and 337–368, p. 363, n. 96; James A. Millward, and Nabijan Tursun, “Political history and strategies of control, 1884–1978”, in *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland*, ed. S. Frederick Starr, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 2004, pp. 63–98, 73. However, David Brophy has shown that this meeting is both “too early and too late” to be considered the genesis of the modern Uighur identity. See David Brophy, “Rebirth of a Nation: The Modern Revival of Uyghur Ethnicity”, unpublished MA thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2005. Further, it was not until the institutionalization of the ethnonym by the Soviets, and then later the CCP, that there was widespread adoption of the label, leading to the nascence of the modern Uighur identity.


11. Ibid., pp. 283–291.


16. Several websites are also written in Uighur or Chinese.
17. Take for example the two sites “meshrep.com”, available online at: http://www.meshrep.com, a predominantly English language site; and “Uyghurlargha Hux Hewer”, available online at: <http://www.injil.net>, a completely Uighur website. The Uyghurlargha Hux Hewer website has been viewed 25,776 times since 8 July 2001, while meshrep.com has been viewed 1,213,095 times since 9 June 2004 (accessed 15 October 2005).
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
37. J. Rudelson, Oasis identities, op. cit.
39. Ibid.
China’s Policy towards Uighur Nationalism

ERIC HYER

Abstract
This paper seeks to place China’s policy toward its Uighur Muslim minority in Xinjiang in a broader context. In the post-Soviet period, the dynamics of Eurasia has fundamentally changed. The independence of the Central Asian states that were part of the Soviet Union had a demonstrable effect on the Uighurs of China. As a result, Uighur nationalism became a force with which the Chinese authorities had to contend. Chinese authorities consider China a multi-ethnic state of Han Chinese and various minorities, and any nationalist or independence movements are considered illegitimate because China does not recognize the right of national self-determination and adheres strictly to a policy of assimilation. Concerns over growing Uighur nationalism impinge on China’s policy of economic expansion and its growing energy needs that make Central Asia a strategic region. In the past decade, China has developed better relations with its Central Asian neighbours based on such strategic interests. By developing these ties, it is seeking to form alliances in order to dampen the development of Uighur nationalism, block Russia from reasserting its influence in the region, and prevent the United States and its allies from excluding China from its security and economic ambitions in the region.

Introduction
Since the evaporation of the Soviet empire, and amid the break-up of the Soviet satellite states, nationalist movements long kept in check by totalitarian dictatorships have re-emerged. This is a global phenomenon that has had, among other effects, an impact on the minority nationalities in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The sudden independence of the former Soviet Central Asian republics had a “demonstration effect” in nearby China, resulting in a stronger assertion of Uighur and pan-Turkic nationalism with renewed demands for a change in the status quo. This underlines the continuing importance of the minority nationalities question (shaoshu minzu wenti) in the PRC. Several scholars have done excellent studies of the minority nationalities in China, but it seems that renewed attention at this time is appropriate.

Over two decades ago Joseph Rothschild argued that “fertile circumstances abound in modern and transitional (modernizing) societies”, for the politicization of ethnicity. He concluded that “politicized ethnicity has become the crucial principle of political legitimation and delegitimization of systems, states, regimes, and governments”. Recent developments clearly show that scholars underestimated the cultural, psychological, and linguistic forces behind nationalism, which many viewed as a historical phenomenon that would eventually be transcended by global economic and other transnational forces.
Nationalist movements, although held in check for a time following World War II, re-emerged after the end of the Cold War with far-reaching consequences that altered the political map of the world and will undoubtedly persist for a time. The re-emergence of these nationalist movements has quickly become one of the most distinguishing features of the post-Cold War era. Ongoing conflicts are no longer characterized by “East–West” tensions, but are predominantly wars waged by “nations” against “states” in a struggle to reconcile state and national identity. Such movements claim “nationhood” based on historical, cultural, and linguistic characteristics; these are the same elements on which nation-states have based their claim to legitimacy in the past. Established nation-states have resisted such movements by a variety of means, including violent suppression. However, a more subtle means has been to deny these peoples the fundamental elements of “nationhood” within or separate from established states.

Unlike the Soviet Union, which granted “republic” status to larger national groups (later ironically used by these republics as the basis for independence during the disintegration of the USSR), the PRC only recognizes the “cultural independence” of the various minority nationalities within autonomous regions directly under the central government. This artificial separation of political and ethnic/cultural domains has been used by the Chinese Communist regime in an attempt to pacify minority nationalities living within the borders of the PRC. However, many of these non-Chinese minority nationalities—such as the Uighurs—continue to press for the reconciliation of their sense of “nation” with the desire for independent territorial states. Unlike the Soviet Union, which, at least in principle, recognized the right of self-determination, the PRC has never, since it was established, recognized the aspirations for national independence or the right of secession of the non-Chinese nationalities currently under its control. Beijing has no patience with such movements, as has been clearly proved in Xinjiang (Chinese Turkistan) in recent years.

The PRC refers to minority nationalities within its present borders by such terms as zhongzu (race) or zongzu (clan or branch), and uses the category “Chinese” (Zhongguoren), as opposed to Han (often translated as “ethnic Chinese”), to include all ethnic groups, all of which are included within the “Chinese nation” (Zhonghua minzu). The term minzu does not have a “political” connotation, but only a cultural one and this is recognized by the present regime in China in the form of autonomous regions inhabited by non-Han Chinese. The PRC regards itself as a unified multi-ethnic country, denying the national identity of the minority nationalities, regarding them as Chinese ethnic groups within the Chinese state. Thus, the only relevant aspect of the nationalities question in the eyes of the Chinese government is relations between the different “Chinese nationalities”. Any aspirations for independent statehood on the part of such groups are considered seditious and since September 11 2001, included as one of the “three evils” of “separatism, extremism, and terrorism”.

China’s Minorities and National Self-determination

I will narrow the following discussion by focusing on one aspect of the nationalities question in China, namely the right of national self-determination for China’s minorities. Close analysis reveals an underlying sinocentrism and idealism regarding the nationalities question that is deeply rooted in China’s cultural and historical traditions.

The leader of the nationalist revolution that overthrew the Qing (Manchu) dynasty, Sun Yat-sen, held a sinocentric view claiming that China was a united nation inhabited by one people. He asserted that “China, since the Ch’in [Qin] and Han dynasties,
has been developing a single state out of a single race”, and that eventually “all names of individual people inhabiting China” would die out, thus uniting all minority nationalities with the Han in a “single cultural and political whole”. Following the revolution in 1911, the Nationalist government strongly opposed independence movements led by Mongolians, Tibetans, and Uighurs. Sun’s successor, Chiang Kai-shek, inherited this sinocentric view. Chiang rejected the right of national self-determination asserting that: “The Chinese nation has lived and developed within these river basins, and there is no area that can be split up or separated from the rest, and therefore, no area that can become an independent unit”.

Communist Party Nationalities Policy

After coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) condemned independence movements as “reactionary”. The CCP reluctantly accepted the “loss” of “Outer Mongolia” as a fait accompli, but the new Communist regime forcibly annexed Tibet and Xinjiang (Eastern Turkistan). Independence movements in these areas have persisted to the present.

Although prior to coming to power the Communists supported the right of national self-determination, once in power they narrowed their view of self-determination to mean autonomy within a united China. The new Communist government declared in 1949 that China was a “united nation of multiple nationalities”. This policy, they argued, was the “outgrowth of the historical development of the past several thousand years”. China was characterized as a “big fraternal and co-operative family composed of all nationalities”. The First National Peoples Congress drafted a constitution that did not consider secession a legitimate right and considered regions inhabited by non-Chinese “inalienable parts of the People’s Republic of China”. The “Program for Enforcement of National Regional Autonomy” provided for the establishment of autonomous regions, but stated that “all national autonomous districts shall be an inseparable part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China”.

The Chinese Communists inherited a deeply rooted sinocentricism. Some form of federation, along the lines of the Soviet model, was rejected due to the sinocentric desire for a strong, centrally governed China. This policy was justified by arguing that:

Led and instructed by the [CCP], the people of each nationality had already greatly heightened their . . . patriotic consciousness, greatly changed and transcended their original situation of mutual antagonism, and gradually formed bonds of equality, unity, mutual help, and cooperation as a basis for realizing common political aims and interests. Therefore, the establishment of a united, multinational state was the desire of the great bulk of the people of all nationalities in our country.

Minority nationalities were not considered suitable for “nation-statehood”, because . . . in political, social, economic, cultural, and other respects, these people . . . were ill prepared for separation; all the national minorities (including those of Sinkiang [Xinjiang] and Tibet), because of cultural and historical conditions, and especially because of close economic relations, formed with the Han [Chinese] a single, unbreakable unit.

Since 1949 Beijing has pursued a policy of integrating and assimilating the minority nationalities. In the article entitled “On the rectification campaign and socialist
education among the minority nationalities”, written in the latter 1950s, the case for assimilation was made by arguing:

In remote days, China was already a country . . . practicing the system of centralism . . . [T]he historical development of our country led to the formation of an irresistible and inevitable trend, namely, the trend toward a united people’s China . . . Any nationality attempting secession is acting contrary to the trend of the long historical development and its basic requirement.16

In a 1957 speech, Premier Zhou Enlai argued that assimilation is a “progressive act if it means natural merger of nations advancing towards prosperity. Assimilation as such has the significance of promoting progress”.17 This view is based on the assumption that non-Han peoples are economically and culturally drawn to China and willingly accept sinification (Hanhua), as was the case throughout much of China’s history with many minority nationalities, but not with Turkish nationalities in Inner Asia. With the end of the Cold War, however, the world embarked on a renewed period of national independence movements. The break-up of the Soviet Empire had a demonstration effect that invigorated nationalist movements around the world and the impact on China was evident in the well-publicized revolts in Xinjiang and movements to establish an independent Uighur nation-state.

The Separatist Movement in Xinjiang

The Muslim Uighur population of Xinjiang shares little in common with China culturally, linguistically, or historically. The independence of their ethnic brothers in Central Asia invigorated the nationalist independence movement among Uighurs in Xinjiang. Due to the ethnic character and the geopolitical significance of the region, the nationalist movement in Xinjiang is probably more threatening to China’s unity than any such movements in Tibet or Inner Mongolia.

Historically, Beijing has struggled to maintain central government control over the region. Russian and Soviet intrigue, and local independence movements, are a thing of recent history. Religious and ethnic unrest has simmered for many years. In 1962 Beijing crushed a revolt by tens of thousands of Uighurs and 60,000 then fled across the border to Kazakhstan.18 More recently, anti-Chinese feelings among Xinjiang’s Turkic-Muslim population erupted in February 1997 in Yining, a strategically important town along the border between Xinjiang and Kazakhstan. Reports vary, but officials claim that during the riots nine people were killed and nearly 200 were injured. Uighur sources in Kazakhstan claim as many as 100 died in the disturbances. Following the riots, Chinese authorities executed 12 leaders and jailed about 27 people for their roles in the unrest. The spokesman for the United National Revolutionary Front of East Turkistan based in Kazakhstan claimed that, by the end of the year, the Chinese military had killed nearly 200 Uighur nationalists and had arrested more than 2,000. Following the February riots, separatists planted bombs in Yining and Urumqi that killed several people. Eight people were executed for involvement in this series of bombings.19

Xinjiang Party Secretary Wang Lequan admitted that “we must soberly realize that enemy activities are still serious”. There were lingering concerns about the loyalty of local Uighur officials, and 260 local Uighur leaders who were suspected of being sympathetic with the independence movement were sacked. Chinese authorities also took measures to prevent the spread of such uprisings by dispatching 17,000 officials
to key villages, work units, and military farms to reinforce propaganda and education work. They doubled the number of security guards and military presence was enhanced by an estimated 100,000 soldiers.  

Chinese attributed the anti-Chinese demonstrations and terrorist activities not only to separatists, but also to religious fanatics and “foreign forces;” a direct reference to the East Turkistan Independence Movement, recognized by some as a terrorist organization based in Central Asia. Amudun Niyaz, chairman of the Xinjiang People's Congress concluded that “we must maintain high vigilance and be profoundly aware that the main dangers ... are splitism and illegal religious activities”.  

During the February 1997 demonstrations, many banners displayed Islamic religious expressions and many small neighbourhood mosques have become the focal point of anti-Chinese activities. The government clamped down on what it considers “illegal religious activities” and closed many mosques in an attempt to suppress the local grassroots support for nationalist movements.  

In September 1997 a second wave of demonstrations occurred in several areas in Xinjiang lasting for six days. According to reports from Hong Kong, more than 3,000 people were involved and many rebels used small arms and bombs to attack local government offices and communications facilities. An estimated 30 local party members, People’s Liberation Army officers, and soldiers, and 80 demonstrators were killed. A third wave of bombing started on October 1, China’s national day, and lasted for a few days killing more than 20 people.  

Chinese authorities clearly associated the organization of local mosques and increased religiosity with these “subversive” activities. Hasimu Mamuti, deputy chief of the Xinjiang procuratorate, accused Uighur separatists and “religious extremist forces” of encouraging “Pan Islam” and “religious fanaticism” to deceive “people who have little common sense, no knowledge of the truth and only a naive love for religion” to create public opinion in support of national independence. He argued that “all the disturbance, chaos and violent terrorism ... are almost without exception connected to illegal religious activities”. He concluded that, “if the unlawful and criminal separatist activities under the cover of religion are not resolutely dealt with, there will never be any peace in the region”.  

President Jiang Zemin’s July 1998 visit to Kazakhstan, and his call for greater vigilance in suppressing the separatist movement while visiting Xinjiang, was accompanied by several terrorist incidents. In the southern oasis town of Hotan (Hetian) several bombs exploded outside of the CCP headquarters. The situation in Hotan has been very tense since a Uighur nationalist activist killed 16 policemen in November 1996. The bombing in Hotan was followed by a bomb in Korla (Kuerle) a few days later. In mid-August 1998, eight police officers were killed in a bomb blast in Kashgar (Kashi) and the city was placed under curfew.  

The eruption of pro-independence demonstrations and other activities in 1997 were not momentary disturbances, but have deep historical and religious roots and will likely persist for the foreseeable future, and in fact have gained momentum since September 11, 2001. Beijing has enhanced its vigilance in the face of recent incidents and Chinese sources have begun to refer to the independence movement as an “armed struggle”. Xinjiang party secretary Wang Lequan concluded that “national separatists, violent terrorists, and religious fanatics ... have continued to secretly muster forces ... to stage sabotage activities whenever an opportunity arises”. He predicted that the “struggle between separatists and anti-separatists will be a protracted, fierce, and arduous one”.
Pan-Turkic Nationalism and Unrest in Xinjiang

What is the motivation of those carrying out the uprisings, what is their ultimate goal, and from whom do they receive support? Just over a decade ago, Samuel P. Huntington outlined a new paradigm to explain conflict in the post-Cold War era. Huntington argued that rather than wars between states, conflict between civilizations would characterize the post-Cold War era. At the international level we have not yet experienced the predicted conflicts, but certainly at the sub-national level, we are witnessing a “clash of civilizations”. As mentioned at the outset of this essay, now many conflicts seem characterized by nations against states as ethnic groups seek to realize their aspirations for statehood.

The conflict smouldering in Xinjiang has the characteristics of a clash of civilizations as the Muslim Uighurs assert their independent national identity against a strong Chinese state. Xinjiang is culturally, linguistically, and historically part of a Turkish civilization distinct from the civilization that developed in China. The Turkic-Muslims of Xinjiang have never fully assimilated into Chinese culture in the same way that many other minority nationalities in China have. The growth of Islamic nationalism as a transnational force makes this nationalist movement in Xinjiang especially challenging for Beijing. As such, what are the implications of developments in Xinjiang in recent years for China?

Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Wang Lequan believes that the separatists are “religious reactionaries” that want to establish an “Islamic kingdom”. However, there is ample evidence that the leaders of the movement are not simply religious fanatics, but Pan-Turkic nationalists. The support for the movement comes from neighbouring Turkic-speaking countries. Despite the pledge by the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan to not support the Xinjiang separatist movement, supporters of the movement openly operate from these countries. Uighurs living in Turkey also support the movement. In March 1998 a demonstration in front of the Chinese embassy in Istanbul called for “freedom for East Turkistan”. During the many demonstrations over the past few years in Xinjiang, slogans calling for the CCP and the People’s Liberation Army to get out of Xinjiang, and calls to establish “Xinjiangstan” or “Uighuristan” are common. The common denominator is not Islam, but Pan-Turkic nationalism.

Given the deep cultural, linguistic, and historical roots of Pan-Turkic nationalism, once the Central Asian states became independent, it is not surprising that ethnic nationalism in Xinjiang was invigorated. Historically, towards the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Central Asia was a battle ground in the “great game” for hegemony by the British and Russian powers. Now again in the twenty-first century, Xinjiang may be a battleground on which an ethnic nationalist movement seeking to exercise its right to national self-determination will wage war against a Chinese hegemonic regime that no longer recognizes such a right and seeks greater influence in the rest of Central Asia as well.

A continuing source of tension in Beijing’s relations with the newly independent Central Asian states is the sensitive issues of pan-Turkic nationalism, support for the Xinjiang separatist movement, and efforts to re-establish “Eastern Turkistan”. The
demonstration effect of the independence of fellow Turkic ethnic groups renewed the vision of an independent “Eastern Turkistan” among Xinjiang’s Uighur population and caused great concern for Beijing. An Eastern Turkistan Republic was briefly established in 1944 while China was beleaguered by the Japanese invasion. The Eastern Turkistan Republic had a national anthem and a national flag—a white crescent and star against a blue background. Led by Islamic scholars, Uighurs wanted a homeland free of Chinese influence. Recently an internal security report concluded that the independence movement in Xinjiang is the main threat to China’s stability, ranking concern over this above Tibet and unemployed workers. An estimated one million troops are stationed in Xinjiang; with no immediate external threat they are mainly there to keep a lid on ethnic unrest.

In March 1992, the leader of Xinjiang’s regional government, Tomur Dawamat warned that, “the changeable international situation has affected … Xinjiang’s social stability. Hostile forces, both at home and abroad, have stepped up their infiltration, subversion and sabotage”. A Chinese scholar concluded that “either way we lose. If the Central Asian states fall apart, chaos spreads to China. If they manage to survive, Chinese minorities say, ‘Look, it works there. Why can’t we have a state of our own?’” There is evidence that Central Asian states neighbouring China have in the past encouraged Uighur separatism. In September 1992, for example, Kazakhstan authorized the functioning of the International Uighur Alliance on its territory and in 1993 Kazakh media encouraged Uighurs to seek to establish a “motherland”. These issues were raised by Premier Li Peng during his visit to Central Asia in 1994 when he solicited commitments from the republics not to allow separatist movements to operate from their territory against China. A central issue in most all communiqués and agreements between China and Central Asian states is a commitment to not support any separatist movements. Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, hosting 200,000 and 80,000 Uighurs respectively, have since agreed to suppress such movements. Several separatist movements have moved from Kazakhstan to Turkey, and Kyrgyzstan has prevented the organizing of an ethnic Uighur political party. In practice, however, Kazakhstan seems somewhat ambiguous about suppressing such movements, and some separatist organizations that were ostensibly dissolved in 1995 continue to operate openly, an issue that remains a major cause of tension in Sino-Kazakh relations.

Countries with fundamentalist Islamic orientations are a factor in promoting unrest in Xinjiang. The Saudi Arabian Wahhabi movement, the Tabaeghi Jamaat based in Pakistan, and the Taliban of Afghanistan all played a role in encouraging Islamic activism in Xinjiang. The number of madrassahs, or Islamic schools, grew rapidly in the 1990s and in 1997 the Pakistani government took steps to close down as many as 300 such “illegal” schools. Some Uighurs still receive religious training in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to a lesser degree in other Central Asian states. Small amounts of arms are thought to be smuggled across the border by Islamic militants. However, Pakistan’s security relationship with China, especially access to missile and nuclear technology, will mitigate Islamabad’s willingness to support unrest in Xinjiang.

Although China has expressed concerns about pan-Turkic nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism, there is also a realization on Beijing’s part that it may not be as threatening as some Chinese have assumed. Some Chinese analysts conclude that there is no need for “excessive reaction” on the part of China because Central Asia will not slip into chaos. Local nationalism and Russian resistance toward pan-Turkic nationalism reduces its threat to China. However, some Chinese believe that the USA is encouraging pan-Turkic nationalism as a means of destabilizing western China.
While Islamic fundamentalism may present a threat to stability in Xinjiang, some Chinese analysts conclude that it does have one positive aspect—it is anti-Western. These Chinese scholars see the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and pan-Turkic nationalism as a positive factor in establishing Central Asia as a “strategic buffer” against Western and Russian encroachment into China’s western periphery.40

Regional Strategic Concerns and China’s Response

Central Asia has become an important focus of China’s attention as part of the new “Silk Road” economy in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and decentralization of China. Chinese economic reformers in Xinjiang have argued that the “geographical, human and cultural advantages” of Xinjiang’s ethnic ties with Central Asia facilitate western China’s economic development due to “complementary resources and markets”.41 However, other Chinese analysts are apprehensive about the instability that developments in Central Asia could create in China.42 Beijing is keenly aware that Central Asia is re-emerging as a strategic region and is vital to China’s national security; presenting Beijing an historic opportunity to establish Chinese influence in the region, but also creating a potential challenge to Beijing’s hegemony over Xinjiang.43

The Central Asia states, in turn, though seeing the benefits of trade with China, also see China as a potential economic and demographic threat. One analysis of China’s potential focused on its dramatic population growth and the pressure this could potentially create for a form of Chinese lebensraum (additional land necessary for continued economic development—*a la* Third Reich Germany prior to World War II). With its large territory and abundant natural resources, Kazakhstan is logically a place for China to covet. In 1989, only an estimated 40,000 people crossed the border between Xinjiang and Central Asia. At present there are an estimated 500,000 Chinese living in the region. A senior Kazakh military official concluded that “if we do not stop the flood coming to Kazakhstan, there is no doubt that [the ethnic Chinese] will overcome us in ten to fifteen years”.44 In Kyrgyzstan, Chinese traders have purchased considerable amounts of real estate. Kazakh scholars also pointed out that according to some Chinese maps, parts of present day Kazakhstan are considered part of China historically. This remains a long-term concern for Kazakhstan despite the fact that international boundary treaties have been concluded over the last decade.45

Aware of such apprehensions, Beijing has taken steps to allay any fears of Chinese expansionism among Central Asian states and blunt the influence of Central Asia upon Uighur national movements in Xinjiang. Following a Shanghai summit, on April 26, 1996, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, and China signed an agreement on confidence-building measures along the border. A year later on April 24, 1997, a second agreement was reached to withdraw military forces 100 kilometres along the 3,500 kilometre boundary between China and the three post-Communist Central Asian states. On July 3, 1998, a third agreement reaffirmed the previous two, and also emphasized cooperation to dampen ethnic unrest in the region stating that “the parties are unanimous that any form of national splitism, ethnic exclusion and religious extremism is unacceptable ... The parties will take steps to fight against ... arms smuggling ... and not allow their territories to be used for activities undermining the national sovereignty, security and social order of any of the five countries”.46 These agreements facilitated through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—also known as “Shanghai -Six”, with the admission of Uzbekistan—are significant confidence-building measures and, for China, some reassurance of regional stability.
The connection between larger geostrategic concerns and ethnic unrest is illustrated in a recent article by a Chinese scholar. He argues that the USA is driven by concerns over energy security and concludes that

... the recent trend in US foreign policy toward ... Central Asia, will have an effect upon ... Xinjiang. The military power of NATO has already been extended to Central Asia, and as soon as the US forms a military alliance ... similar to the one it has with Japan, China will certainly be deeply concerned about the security of the western region of Tibet and Xinjiang.

The author goes on to argue that it is very possibly a goal of the West, led by the USA, to divide western China and use “Xinjiang to establish a political buffer between China and the oil producing countries of Central Asia and the Middle East”.47

This Chinese scholar asserts that the reason the USA is not more vocal in encouraging the Uighur independence movement is because of the dilemma this would create: an independent Xinjiang/Eastern Turkistan would separate China from the oil-producing states of Central Asia on the one hand, but on the other it could encourage the spread of Islamic fundamentalism or create a political vacuum that Russia may attempt to fill. The author concludes by arguing that the West may use the same strategy to break-up China that was used with the Soviet Union. Therefore, the author argues that China must

... from a geopolitical perspective, recognize the strategic significance of the Tibet/Xinjiang region to China’s development in the next century ... The Tibet/Xinjiang region is China’s geopolitical pivot ... If Tibet and Xinjiang become independent, it will certainly cause a chain reaction [as happened in the Soviet Union], and China’s western front will not only loose the natural protection of the high plateau buffer, but this also will threaten the industrial security of the southwestern region ... China must emphasize good neighborly relations with the Central Asian states and, from a geostrategic perspective, recognize the far-reaching significance of China’s involvement in the development of the oil resources of Central Asia and the Middle East.48

This represents a Chinese “realist” viewpoint on the issue, and the author is an analyst at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, an official research institute under the State Council’s Ministry of State Security.

Conclusion

It is clear that Beijing is attempting to enhance its security in a volatile region by keeping a lid on Uighur unrest and developing economic ties with Central Asia as insurance against Russia reasserting its power in the region; by limiting the development of pan-Turkic nationalism; and by preventing the West from excluding China from playing a larger economic role in the region, or foreign-inspired radical Islamic movements from fostering unrest that will threaten stability in Xinjiang. As a French scholar has concluded, “Chinese diplomacy has focused on three objectives: to safeguard stability along the frontiers and in the hinterland ... to expand its sphere of influence in the Central Asian region, and to find new markets for Chinese products”.49 This has been accomplished by concluding military agreements to dampen concerns about China’s ambitions in the region, taking firm measures against any “separatist” organizations and activities, and, as the most dynamic economy in the region, developing economic relationships that tie Central Asia to China and lessens its dependence on Russia and Europe.
This Chinese multifarious policy can also be viewed as a defensive move by China. Rather than attempting to reassure its Central Asian neighbours worried that China may harbour expansionist ambitions, China wants to legitimize Beijing's control over Xinjiang. With smouldering ethnic unrest and a growing independence movement in Xinjiang, closer cooperation with its Central Asian neighbours will thus provide greater stability in the region and encourage governments in the region to take firm measures against separatist movements that could threaten their own stability and vital economic engagement with China.

One could conclude that China has behaved very pragmatically. But some observers remain apprehensive. One has written that “there is some potential within the region for the occurrence of events that would cause Beijing to deviate from this path” because there are a “range of issues on which the Chinese adamantly refuse to compromise”. With regards to the issues of “separatism” and “religious extremism, …in no case would the probability of losing trade and other advantages preclude a forceful response”. Another scholar argues that “more ominously for Central Asia [is] Beijing’s willingness to use force as an instrument of foreign policy … The Chinese military shows no signs of military adventurism in areas outside what it considers legitimate Chinese territory. But what might its response be if the opportunity arose to take back those areas lost to Russia during the 19th century.”

Despite concerns by Central Asians, and speculation by scholars to the contrary, China has proved its pragmatic approach in regards to larger strategic and economic concerns in the region. But if the past provides any insight into the future, we should conclude that when dealing with Uighur and other minority nationalities, China will vigorously protect its territorial sovereignty, by military force if necessary, and will adopt a strong hand against the “three evils” of separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism. At the same time, China will also make large compromises to make broader cooperation with its Central Asian neighbours possible in order to realize more fundamental and long-term strategic and economic interests.

NOTES
1. This paper in its original version was presented at the “2005 Middle East and Central Asia Politics, Economics, and Society Conference”, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA, 8–10 September 2005.
2. Use of the term minzu causes confusion. Often translated as “nation” in English, it is more accurately translated as “ethnic group”. Although the term guojia can also be translated as “nation” it is more accurately translated as “nation-state”. Thus, using the term minzu wenti to mean “nationalities question” is misleading because in Chinese the term has the connotation of relations among ethnic groups, all considered to be “Chinese”, and includes no notion of a right to “nationhood”.
China's Policy towards Uighur Nationalism


22. Ibid., 19 November 1997.


24. Ibid., 10 October 1997; Foreign Broadcast Information Service-China, 5 December 1997.


27. Ibid., 10 October 1997; Foreign Broadcast Information Service-China, 5 December 1997.


43. See C. Harris, “Xinjiang, Central Asia and the implications for China’s policy”, op. cit., pp. 111–129.


Caught Between the Muslim Community and the State: The Role of the Local Uzbek Authorities in Ferghana Valley, 1950s–1980s

VERA EXNEROVA

Abstract

This paper focuses on local authorities in Soviet Uzbekistan and their role in anti-religious policy implementation, as well as on their position in local Muslim communities. Islam has always played a specific, major role in Central Asia. Sovietization policies applied from 1920s onwards attempted to change local society by eradicating Islam, and other religions, from public life, and local authorities were assigned a significant role in this process. On deeper examination, however, it appears that these programs were largely ineffective, and their scale and impact demand further scrutiny. I argue that while local authorities were an extension of the Soviet system that, among other things, disseminated atheistic propaganda and intended to control and to ultimately destroy religious life, their loyalties often rested with their Muslim communities. Furthermore, I argue that the behaviour of local authorities hampered the successful implementation of Soviet anti-religious policies and efforts to control Islam in many respects. I believe that a sound analysis of this issue will lead us to a better understanding of the position of Islam in Soviet Central Asia, as well as helping to understand the ongoing issues surrounding tradition, religion and Islamism in the region today. This paper is based on materials from the National Archive of the Russian Federation, ethnographic data from the Ferghana Valley, and other published materials.

Introduction

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, centuries-old traditional forms and functions of Islam in Central Asian societies confronted the establishment of the atheistic Soviet regime. One of the Soviet system’s main goals was to eradicate religion from society and to create a “Soviet citizen”—a “homo sovieticus”—with an atheistic or materialistic philosophy of life. The Soviet regime therefore pursued campaigns of various intensity against religions, including Islam, throughout the seven decades of its existence. But for a variety of reasons, which I will discuss below, some forms of Islamic observance remained widespread in Central Asia. This was especially true of rites marking the life cycle, including circumcision, marriage, and funerals, but it was also evident in other spheres of religious life of local population. Soviet ethnographers pursuing surveys in Central Asia in the postwar period and towards the end of the USSR repeatedly received the same answer to inquiries about which norms people were following in their daily lives: “[A]ccording to father’s legacy”, and “in a Muslim way”. According to the same surveys, when locals were asked what determined their lives and habits, the predominant answer was “tradition”.

ISSN 1360-2004 print/ISSN 1469-9591 online/06/010101-12 © 2006 Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs DOI: 10.1080/13602000600738798
A major role in the implementation of Soviet anti-religious policy was assigned to local authorities, including both administration and Communist Party (CP) representatives. To further understand why Islamic observance still persisted within local communities, it is therefore necessary to explore the role of these authorities in the process. Using the example of the Ferghana Valley—an agriculturally-rich and densely populated area, and one of Central Asia’s historically religious regions—we see that local authorities appointed by the Soviet system formed an integral part of local Muslim communities, and that the structure of local administration was often adjusted to traditional community structures. Although the whole of official Soviet anti-religious policy is beyond the scope of this paper, through a reading of archival materials, ethnographic surveys, and other published sources, we see how local authorities faced their working obligations; functioned in eradicating, strengthening, or changing the face of Islam in Soviet Central Asia; and what was their position within their own communities. It is my hope that this article will contribute to further understanding of the development of Muslim communities in the region under the Soviet regime, and that it will consequently foster a sound analysis of the situation of Islam after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Patterns of Local Administration

In Central Asian history, traditional social structure, including religious community, was always closely interconnected with local administrations. Indeed, during the last two centuries, all administrative institutions in Central Asia have tried to adapt the structure of mutual relations in the local community network (mahalla) to its administrative needs. As such, after the establishment of the Soviet regime and the formation of titular republics in the region, the idea to create committees based on the mahalla structure reappeared in Uzbekistan leading to the 1932 adoption of the government act entitled, “On Mahalla Committees in Uzbek SSR”. Such Soviet policies of the 1920s and 1930s were primarily aimed at controlling the mahalla through the formation of official committees and their incorporation into party and state structures. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there began a movement to expand and modernize the mahalla itself, and to revitalize it as an instrument of political socialization. The 1932 act was thus further amended by “On Mahalla Committees in Towns, Settlements, Villages and Auls”, which was approved by the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR in 1961.

The primary intent for incorporating the structure of mahalla in the Soviet administration system was to disrupt the traditional local communities. However, the policy fell short at reaching this goal. For instance, traditional norms often influenced the appointment of the kolkhoz chairman, where representatives of traditional local elites or elders were appointed to such posts. Also, it should be noted in this context that the chairman of the kolkhoz, who was part of an administrative hierarchy by which the Soviet regime subordinated kolkhoz activities to its purposes, was called rais (an originally Arabic term meaning “boss” or “leader”, which was also the title of the official controller in charge of Islamic devoutness in Central Asian societies, a type of supervisor for the observance of Muslim laws, as well as a religious policeman). Thus, in many respects, the traditional community continuously refashioned itself and its internal structure within the Soviet administrative system, all in contradiction to Soviet objectives.

Another important factor in understanding the resilience of religion and tradition in Central Asia is that the local administration was traditionally staffed by the native population. Already in the Russian Empire, in order to minimize the chance of provoking the “fanaticism” of the local population, the internal administration of the native population
was left in the hands of local functionaries. The same pattern continued into the Soviet period. This applied especially to the more outlying parts of Uzbekistan, as the Ferghana Valley, and pertained even more in the later period, when domination of natives was almost universal among the highly visible Party and government personnel. In fact, kinship and clan networks were often recomposed on the basis of the territorial and administrative structures put in place by the Soviets.

The Role of Local Authorities in Anti-Religious Policy Implementation

The anti-religious policy of the Soviet regime was not very consistent and changed often according to external and internal influences on Soviet policies and policy makers. Nor was there a special policy towards Islam and the Muslim populations of the USSR. The main Soviet organizations responsible for regulating Islam in the Soviet Union were the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, established in 1944, and its successor, the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), formed in 1965. Commissioners of the Council (so-called upolnomochennye), were placed in all republican and local organs of government. They were nominated by relevant organs in the republic or province (oblast) level, which also determined and paid their salary. The loyalty of these Commissioners was therefore inevitably disputable. They sent reports about their activities both to the Council and to the republic or oblast leadership. Often they received assignments directly from governmental organs, and consequently they did not have the capacity to fulfill their duties towards the Council. Furthermore, during the entire Soviet period, there were other authorities which influenced anti-religious policy. In particular, ideologists of the Central Committees and representatives of the Committee for State Security (KGB) were active in this field. There were often differences in attitudes towards policy implementation between these and the Council, but such problems were also typical between central Soviet institutions in Moscow and their links in the oblasts.

Local administration was supposed to play a major part in the implementation of Soviet anti-religious policy during the entire post-World War II period. In fact, the official Soviet policy laid down by central authorities in Moscow was in many ways dependent on local authorities, whose task was to implement it and make sure that it would reach the local population. The Soviet system had to rely on local authorities both in implementing their policies and also in providing the information by which these policies were evaluated and modified.

The Commissioners of the Council also had to rely upon the local government apparatus to gather information on and expose religious legislation violations. They needed the local administration to control and collect evidence on unregistered religious associations, religious figures, and buildings of former mosques that might be used as prayer-centre, and to monitor and evaluate the religious practice among the local Muslim communities. Local organs of government were likewise supposed to aid in the implementation of repressive anti-religious measures and spreading atheistic propaganda among the local population. Especially before Muslim festivals, these authorities were asked to hold seminars and meetings in the communities to explain the negative effects of performing religious rites, slaughtering animals, and other traditional and Muslim practices. Early in the 1960s, so-called Commissions of assistance (gruppy sodeistviiia) were introduced at various levels of the local apparatus to ensure the implementation of anti-religious enactments. They were attached to local Soviet executive committees (ispolkoms) and composed of CP and state workers, education staff, pensioners, and local activists. It was explicitly stated that one of the most important
aims of the commissions for assistance should be “to discover means of limiting and weakening the activities of religious communities and their ministers (in the framework of the existing legislation) and to offer concrete suggestions on this problem”.14

Local authorities, however, often ignored the real situation on the ground and turned a blind eye on law-breaking on the part of Muslim functionaries and believers or on the contrary pursued administrative actions without making any difference. But in order to draw reasonable conclusions about the loyalties and behaviour of local authorities during the Soviet era, it is important to explore their role in the fields of registration and taxation of religious associations, disseminating atheistic propaganda, prosecuting offenders of anti-religious laws, and regulating various Muslim rites and ceremonies.

Registration and Taxation of Religious Associations

According to the 1929 Law on Religious Associations, Muslim communities had to register in order to be able to operate a mosque. This law was further amended in 1962, though secretly, and only in 1975 publicly. To register, a minimum of twenty believers (the so-called dvatsatka) must have submitted an application to the executive committee of the local Soviet.15 The role of the local administration in this process was crucial. Local officials had to review the application, and even though the final decision was made by the Council in Moscow, this was done on the basis of information provided by local authorities.

As is evident from the communication between Commissioners and their headquarters in Moscow, often local officials did not accept applications to open mosques even though they were properly formulated and the prerequisites for taking such a step had been met. Among the materials of the Commissioners, there are periodical records about a community applying for a registration when, after the local authorities’ inspection, it “turned out” that the signatures on the application were forged and that a person from outside of the village (qishlog) or mahalla had initiated the action and even signed up members of the community without their knowledge.16 Just how far the findings of such inspections corresponded to reality is very difficult to judge; nevertheless, on the basis of such reports the registration or opening of a mosque was denied. Cases of the use of administrative methods to fight religion were even more frequent when it came to unregistered religious associations. But such instances of antagonistic approach to Islam were not necessarily an indication of consistent hostility or an opposition based on ideological considerations. A former mosque was often the only sound structure in a village, so it could be appropriated for economic, cultural, or educational purposes17 and not necessarily due to genuine anti-religious Soviet sentiments.

In the judgment of the Council leadership, such an attitude did not serve to curb Muslim religious activity. On the contrary, it made the local situation more acute, actually heightening the religious mood among believers. In fact, refusing to register religious societies on the grounds that this reduced the population’s “religiosity” ignored realities, and the indiscriminate rejection of all applications achieved the unexpectedly opposite effect. It was counterproductive on two levels, both inducing the illegal performance of religious rites and breeding dissatisfaction among the population. It was often that local communities opened prayer premises without permission because their requests to open a mosque were consistently refused by local government organs.18

There were also instances when local authorities did not respect the registration system set up by Soviet legislation and provided permissions to open mosques without approval of registration from the Council Commissioners. For instance, the Qoqand ispolkom
chairman was reported shortly after World War II to have given permission to no less than 39 mosques to operate without proper registration, and even going so far as to tell the relevant Commissioner that no unofficial mosques were functioning in the town. In one qishloq in Qoqand, believers had, with his agreement, dismantled a former mosque and built a new one, for which a kolkhoz had provided the building materials. And a decade later, local officials helped in the construction of several of the 17 new mosques built in Andijan oblast, and assisted in building mosques in the oblasts of Namangan and Ferghana. Local authorities also often assisted in the activities of unregistered religious associations or religious figures. There were various reasons for doing so: either they had not broken with religious tradition themselves, or they just did not want to attract attention and its associated problems to their district (rayon), or they did not desire to sow discord within their own communities. In fact, there was a general apathy with regard to most levels of the Soviet government apparatus which central authorities were aware of, but they were not able to change such attitudes.

One of the frequently discussed issues in religious policy towards Muslim communities was taxation of registered religious functionaries. Although it contradicted official policy, local organs often taxed only registered religious figures, which encouraged them deliberately to evade registration, and therefore taxation as well. For instance, in 1979, the Commissioner of the Ferghana oblast complained that even though the registration was cancelled for the mullah in Qoqand’s mosque due to repeated infractions against the law, he continued to practice religious services in other districts of the region and collected money from believers; this occurred under the eyes of the local administration and financial authorities, which did not do anything to punish the said mullah or even to tax him.

That the position of local officials toward Islam and its representatives was not the outcome of any firm principle can be learned, too, from instances where it changed in accordance with conditions. There were examples of the same official or local organ first granting permission to believers to build a mosque and then, upon its completion, taking it away, or trying to take it away, from the community. Overall attitudes and concrete policies were moreover influenced by constant discussion on such issues as whether registration of religious associations or taxation of unregistered religious figures legitimized their activities or, on the other hand, whether registration with Soviet authorities brought about collaboration with Soviet atheistic policies.

**Anti-Religious and Atheistic Propaganda**

The themes of Soviet anti-religious and atheistic propaganda were elaborated in 1925 and 1928 and—though the emphasis varied from time to time—such anti-religious propaganda changed little since that time until the dissolution of the USSR. Islam was frequently attacked as an “anti-social religion, the most reactionary and conservative of all” and, according to the Soviet authorities, “Islamic morals were opposed to Communist morals”. As such, anti-religious propaganda was considered to be a moral duty of all Soviet citizens and the Soviet propagandist machine was consequently a massive and costly bureaucracy. The propaganda itself was, however, often monotonous and unimaginative. It also contended with the problem of defining its target. Not last, the efficiency of the agitation and the anti-religious message was essentially cauterized by an ambiguous approach of Soviet organs on all levels, since they were forced during the post-World War II period to address differences between proclaimed aims and reality. For instance, in 1955 the Moscow-based Council chairman, Polianskii, expressed
disagreement on a report of the Commissioner for Uzbekistan that was prepared on the basis of collected field data, and according to which the level of Muslim activities increased in the mid-1950s. “It is impossible to observe an increase of religious activity in Soviet reality,” he claimed. If he had admitted that the report's findings were accurate, it would lead to acceptance of the fact that the materialistic conscience of the working class is not increasing. In the end, the evidence provided had to be explained in another way.25

Nonetheless, the Council Commissioners regularly reported thoroughly about the atheistic propaganda that had been implemented, especially during various religious rites and ceremonies. They also asked the local authorities to take an active part in controlling it. For instance, in 1979, the Commissioner in Namangan oblast before the beginning of the ruza-hayit feast (a celebration marking the end of the Muslim fast) sent a letter to every ispolkom in the towns and rural areas and to the commissions of assistance, with the date and number of planned sermons and recommendations for propaganda seminars. He also contacted various other local authorities, including press, financial, cultural, transport, and other departments, and asked them to monitor the course of ruza-hayit and report back. He then reported that 1,250 atheist lectures were read and 120 meetings with local people had been organized with an overall target audience of over 40,000 people.26

If the above was a report sent to Moscow based on feedback from local authorities, the reality on the ground could have been different. The population did not often read the anti-religious books and pamphlets, did not attend lessons, and if they did, they showed disagreement with the critical remarks on the traditions and customs which they observed in everyday life. Sometimes, especially in rural areas, representatives of local kolkhoz administrations, knowing that the lessons would not be well received by the population, just confirmed to the lector that the lesson was read.27 At other times, the figures reported by the CRA officials showed that local authorities had little interest in pursuing the control. For instance, the Commissioner in Ferghana oblast reported to the CRA in Moscow in 1978 that even though 216 sermons had been read during that year in only four registered mosques in that oblast, representatives of the local affiliate of the Scientific House for Atheism attended only 21 of them.28

The Role of the Local Prosecution Authorities

Local militsiya (police) or prosecution authorities in Soviet Uzbekistan were also not spared by the dilemmas that plagued the effective implementation of Soviet anti-religious policies. In Namangan oblast in the early 1950s, for example, the local law enforcement agency failed to initiate proceedings against religious figures who perpetrated serious crimes. One mullah who had allegedly both committed rape and performed marriage rites for an adolescent got off scot-free.29 Sometimes, even though a person was sentenced for illegal religious activities by the local prosecution office, after the punishment he resumed his activities. In 1978 in the Andijan oblast, for example, there was a trial against a pensioner who was already sentenced in 1970 for two years but who again in 1974–1977 ran a private religious school, teaching both girls and boys in his house.30 Often such people who were sentenced for teaching children unofficially or illegally distributing religious literature were let go on the basis of old age, deteriorating health conditions, or disability.

The same problems were regularly encountered during the Muslim fast. In 1985, for example, on the basis of the resolution of the Spiritual Administration for Central Asia and Kazakhstan, registered religious functionaries were not allowed to read the Qur'an
in mosques during the fast. Although, for instance, the Commissioner in Ferghana oblast had informed local prosecution authorities in advance about the necessity for strengthening anti-religious controls, due to their weak response, the work of unregistered mullahs was not only not paralyzed, but a revival of activities by unofficial Islamic figures is thought to have taken place during that time period.  

Muslim Rites and Ceremonies

A large part of the activity of the Council Commissioners and local officialdom in regard to Islam was connected with the observance of the fast and various other religious festivals. Every year, the same Commissioners wrote vast reports on mosque attendance, sermons, financial contributions, activities of official and, among other things, unregistered religious functionaries. As in other respects, these reports sometimes included complaints about local officialdom not taking adequate measures to control these ceremonies and festivals. According to local inhabitants of the Ferghana Valley, state organs often turned a blind eye on performances of religious rites and visits to holy sites and shrines (mazars). Indeed, the Soviet regime was well aware of the persistent performance of religious rites among local Muslim populations of Central Asia. One of the main instruments in the endeavour to eradicate Islam at the individual level was the so-called socialist civic rite, which was designed to replace traditional life-cycle religious rites such as weddings and burial. In Uzbekistan, the work of creating new rites and holidays began to be conducted in a systematic fashion after the 13th plenum of the republican Central Committee in June 1964. Ispolkoms organized socialist rites with all the traditional accompanying festivities at the same time as Muslim festivals so as to distract the population from mosques and participation in Islamic rites. According to Soviet policy-makers, civic rites were a better way of diverting the population from religion than the administrative steps often used by local officials. However, it is known that such efforts and activities remained unpopular among the local population. In the first half of 1965, for example, only about 15 Komsomol (Young Communist League) youth weddings were held in Tashkent, while at the same time 25–30 couples registered every day for traditional Islamic marriages.

The Position of Local Authorities within Muslim Communities

For centuries, the social structure of Islam in Central Asia, or conditions whereby an individual was conscious of his or her Muslim identity, has been largely communal. A Muslim in such a communal context is not a person alone, but part of a group of neighbours and relatives. This has been especially true in the Ferghana Valley, a region that has traditionally been one of the centres of religious life in Central Asia, a condition that has been bolstered by changing demographic, social, and economic conditions under the Soviet regime—and thereafter in the post-Communist era.

Although Uzbekistan’s share of the Ferghana Valley formed only 4% of the territory of the Uzbek SSR, in the 1980s more than one-fourth of the country’s population lived in the region. The population was—and continues to be—particularly dense in rural areas, including many quasi-rural towns with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants. In such towns the local populations generally maintained typical features of village settlements and a traditional, rural way of life. Owing to these features, Ferghana Valley was in principle a compact settled region with a very high population density that sharply increased
social and religious communication, a principal condition for the durability of the traditional way of life and the religious and communal mentality.

Furthermore, the region was characterized by low territorial and social mobility of the indigenous inhabitants. According to a 1989 statistic, for example, only about 14% of the population lived in the place where they had not been born. Migration was common only in towns and usually only between towns in a given district. The tendency of the rural population to outnumber the urban population was also strengthened by the change of the urban social structure. In this period, towns were growing larger because they were absorbing neighbouring qishloqs into their administrative borders. For instance, the town of Ferghana incorporated the Lenin sovkhoz as well as the Juidam qishloq, both of which maintained their agricultural character, former administrative structure, and traditional—including religious mentality. In this way, many populated areas had town status only formally, and people continued to live according to rural traditions. This is thought to have led to a revival of traditional ideology and social institutions at the lowest level of the local administration: qishloqs, districts, and families.

Demographic data show that towards the end of the Soviet Union, people working for both the local administration and Party apparatus formed on average only 2% of the population. These people were in fact ordinary citizens indiscernible from the local native population, often not even Party members. Furthermore, they had to make their own accommodation with the local informal power structure, which counselled against juxtaposing oneself to the mahalla. Therefore, the individual loyalties of much of the local administrators and local Party apparatus members tended to be first and foremost to neighbours, relatives, and local elders. This was reflected in individual behaviour and overall position within their communities.

It was common that Party representatives and members of local authorities lived according to Muslim traditions. Often they took an active part in ceremonies and rites, especially in life-cycle rites, including burials and memorial services for their relatives and in the circumcisions of newborn males in their family. In fact, this was necessary to avoid social isolation. These Party and governmental representatives performed these duties secretly or used the excuse that they, for example, participated in a circumcision ceremony of a new-born son purely for its hygienic benefits. Sometimes people reported against such authorities, resulting in ironic situations, such as when a committee secretary whose son was circumcised had to reprimand his subordinate officer for allowing the circumcision; the subordinate was reported and had to file a record about his infraction. At other times, the circumcision was done without the participation of the father, who did not always give his consent. Despite the forgiveness of some, however, most people, educated or not, regularly circumcised their sons and participated in the ensuing religious ceremony.

Altogether, for the period under study, it is difficult to know how many or what percentage of local officials and Party members participated in the performance of Muslim rites, as they tried to perform them secretly in order to avoid losing their job. But it is evident that Islam, though always under pressure from the state, never came close to losing its cultural salience. This was true even for the most zealous “atheist” elite, who nearly always practiced circumcision and semi-traditional wedding and funeral rituals. In the countryside, working meetings of cadres would take place in an office under a portrait of Lenin and would then be followed by a gathering in the open air with reciting of *fatiha* (Muslim prayer and blessings), a ritual practiced before and after mealtimes among Central Asian Muslims.
One area in which local authorities’ loyalty to their own Muslim communities was evident was the determination of one’s social status according to age. According to tradition—and also partly due to the effect of Soviet rule on the young generation—young people did not feel obliged to say their prayers and observe the Muslim fast. This was not perceived as a gross infraction of rules in conducting the life of a Muslim. On the other hand, older people often performed their prayers regularly, observed the Muslim fast, and took part in almost all religious ceremonies and rites. In a way, representatives of the older generation acted or conducted their religious duties in the name of the younger generation. Thus, it was not rare that people working for the local administration started to be active in the local community after their retirement. Sometimes they even served as religious functionaries in performing religious rites.

As has already been mentioned, members of the local administration were exposed to strong public opinion of the community. In every mahalla there were several influential people whose opinion was held in generally high esteem. These were mostly elders, religious leaders, or people with high social ranking. However, discussions about social life were more about an approved pattern of behaviour, rather than harsh prescriptions or sanctions from the community. If, for example, the chairman of the kolkhoz had a dispute with an elder in the choikhona (tea house) about where a cemetery should be built, he would be accused of not taking into account the elder’s opinion, which he could not oppose, even though the cemetery may have finally been built in the place where the kolkhoz had intended.

Occasionally, the cooperation between religious functionaries and lay representatives of the mosques and local bureaucracy even led to a shift in roles. In the early 1950s, for example, there were more than 100 cases reported in Uzbekistan in which members of the kolkhoz administration were elected to executive committees of religious associations. The role of people working for the local administration was also important for the community during various rites and ceremonies. If, in the nineteenth century, the equipment for collective rites had been owned by the community, under the Soviet regime it was often the kolkhoz that owned all the necessary equipment, such as the tables, ovens, and large pots and pans necessary for preparing a community meal. In addition to this function, the community traditionally helped to organize and conduct religious and social gatherings, which had been one of the main functions of the traditional administration, and this was where the kolkhoz in fact partially maintained and renewed the functions of traditional Muslim community.

Naturally, this traditional role often placed local officials in a very difficult position. They had responsibilities towards their supervisors in Soviet organs at the same time as they were part of the same Muslim community that they were supposed to control and monitor. Sometimes they were obliged to distribute anomalous resolutions along with loads of atheistic literature and lectures. At other times, officials at the local level went so far as to make use of the status enjoyed by the Muslim religious leaders in order to mobilize the population for recurrent economic campaigns and other urgent assignments, a phenomenon that necessarily served to enhance the authority of Muslim leaders even more and to give legitimacy to their public role. At one point, for example, the Party secretary and chairman of the productivity council of a kolkhoz in the Andijan oblast had arranged a ceremony at which sacrifices were made and a mullah was invited to read the Qur’an and lead a prayer among the participants for a good cotton crop and an abundance of produce. And at times of drought, Muslim leaders were even invited by local authorities to pray for rain.
Conclusion

As we have seen, the traditional community structure and mahalla mentality was partly reinforced by Soviet policies in the field of local administration, and in some respects, the Communist Party system. This fact further influenced the local authorities' loyalties and their role in official Soviet anti-religious policy implementation. There was no strict pattern behind their behaviour, which was often marked by considerable apathy towards anti-religious policy implementation, or even by open protest or unwillingness to pursue orders from the headquarters; but there were also cases when local authorities actively executed official policies and even went beyond them. Nonetheless, it is evident that local authorities in fact often failed to advance the aims of official Soviet policies in the control of religious life and the dissemination of anti-religious propaganda, and hindered these policies in many respects.

Therefore, based on the above case of Communist Uzbekistan, if Islam underwent some changes in both form and function under the Soviet regime, official Soviet policies and efforts to control Islam through a costly machinery of anti-religious propaganda had only little impact on this process. Changes in people’s perceptions of their own identity and belonging to the greater Muslim community were highly influenced by demographic, economic, and social processes that took place on both republican and local community levels. To further understand Muslim social changes during the Soviet era—and in the post-Communist age—in Central Asia, I argue, we must concentrate our analysis on such socioeconomic issues.

NOTES

1. This paper in its original version was presented at the “Central Eurasian Studies Society 6th Annual Conference”, Boston University, MA, 29 September–2 October 2005.
3. See, for instance, Sergei Petrovich Poliakov, Traditsionalism v sovremennom sredneasiatskom obschestve (Traditionalism in Contemporary Central Asian Society), Moscow: Centralnyi dom nauchnovo ateizma, 1989, p. 3. Interpretations and conclusions that Soviet ethnographers derived from this fact are another important issue, however, one which is beyond the scope of this paper.
4. Mahalla is a traditional neighbourhood entity of the Central Asian towns and settlements.
6. Ibid., p. 29.
8. It was believed that if the whole structure of social relations that constituted the mahalla could be uprooted or transformed, then Central Asian society could too. See D. M. Abramson, “From Soviet to mahalla”, op. cit., p. 28.
9. Sometimes even “dynasties” were created in this respect. For instance, Communism kolhoz (previous name: “Molotov”) in the Ferghana oblast of Uzbekistan was chaired by Kuchkor Zainiev from the 1930s to the 1950s, and in the 1960s and 1970s by his son Zokir. There are many other similar examples. See S. Abashin, “Sotsialnye vzaimootnoshenia” (Social relationships), op. cit., pp. 87–88.


13. In this context it is interesting to add that most CRA officials came from a police or propaganda background, and that at least one of the deputy chairmen was usually a KGB officer. See John Anderson, "Legislative and administrative control of religious bodies", in *Candle in the Wind: Religion in the Soviet Union*, eds E.B. Shirley, Jr. and M. Rowe, Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1989, p. 73.


16. See for example letter from T. Abbasov to M. M. Rachmankulov, 30 August 1979, State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. 6991, o. 3, d. 1280/1, pages unnumbered.

17. When, in the aftermath of very heavy rains, the Spiritual Administration instructed that a number of mosques in the Andijan oblast be repaired, necessitating the requisitioning of building materials, the local organs of the government expressed their dissatisfaction. In one case they authorized an imam-khatib to seek the requisite materials beyond the confines of the oblast. See Yaacov Roi, *Islam in the Soviet Union. From the Second World War to Gorbachev*, London: Hurst & Company, 2000, p. 661.


20. According to Roy, the main concern of the cadres was to "avoid bother". See O. Roy, *La Nouvelle Asie Centrale*, op. cit., p. 231.


33. Sabrina Ramet, *Cross and Commissar: The Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 51. Suggestions to develop secular Marxist rituals to fulfill the vacuum created by the gradual disappearance of religion were already advanced under Khrushchev, although he considered it to be in violation of Leninist philosophy and therefore did not pursue the matter seriously. See M. Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics*, op. cit., pp. 31–32.


40. In fact, in the police, KGB, and positions of authority in government in some areas, khojas (who define their identity primarily in terms of descent from important religious figures such as Muhammad or the first four caliphs) could commonly be found. John Schoeberlein-Engel, “Identity in Central Asia: construction and contention in the conceptions of ‘Ozbe’, ‘Tajik’, ‘Muslim’, ‘Samarqandi’ and other groups”, unpublished dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1994, p. 160.

41. Compromise between the new and the old local elites and cooptation of one by the other was common practice in the districts and lower levels, especially in the countryside. See D. S. Carlisle, “Uzbekistan and the Uzbeks”, *op. cit.*, p. 32.


43. The attitudes of teachers toward religion evoked expressions of concern, not only because teachers formed the outlook of the young generation, but also because they were an important channel for extending the state’s influence over the large rural population. Teachers were supposed to be models of correct Soviet behaviour in their personal lives. However, they were often not active advocates of atheism and sometimes they were actually practicing Muslims. See Muriel Atkin, *The Subtlest Battle: Islam in Soviet Tajikistan*, Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1989, pp. 12–13.

44. Indeed, from the end of 1980s, many from among this elite became enthusiastic sponsors of the reconstruction of mosques and religious schools. See J. Schoeberlein-Engel, “Identity in Central Asia”, *op. cit.*, p. 24.


46. This was repeatedly confirmed by various surveys in Central Asia, which stated that “only old people were coming to the mosque to pray”; “carriers of religious notions were mainly old people, the young population was relatively non-religious”; or that “young people did not know religion and paid no attention to it”. Cited in Gleb Pavlovich Snesarev, “Dukhovnyi oblik uzbetskovo krestianina” (Spiritual profile of an Uzbek peasant), in *Etnograficheskie ocherki uzbekskovo selskovo naselenia* (Ethnographic Studies of Uzbek Rural Population), eds Galina Petrovna Vasilieva and Belkis Khali-lovna Karmysheva, Moscow: Nauka, 1969, p. 276.


50. For instance, due to the high suicide rate among young brides and to the fact that Islam does not approve of suicide, the Council, as a representative of the Soviet regime, several times ordered the Spiritual Administration to issue a *fatwa* to the effect that everyone who takes his own life loses his or her right to a religious burial and regular mourning rites. See Y. Roi, *Islam in the Soviet Union*, *op. cit.*, p. 547.