

# CHINA'S ISLAMIC FRONTIERS: BORDERS AND IDENTITIES

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## INTRODUCTION

### ISLAM IN CHINA The Historical Background

***Muslims in China are not Chinese converts: for the most part they are the descendants of Muslims from the Middle East and Central Asia who migrated to China***

Muslims in China are not, as is sometimes believed, Chinese converts: for the most part they are the descendants of Muslims from the Middle East and Central Asia who migrated to China at different times and for different reasons. Muslims appeared in China as early as the Tang Dynasty (618-907), entering the country by two main routes, overland across Central Asia by what was to become known as the Silk Route and by sea into south-eastern China, now sometimes called the Spice Route as most of its travellers were merchants seeking spices from the islands of Southeast Asia. Some of these traders settled in the port cities of the south-eastern coast, in particular Quanzhou, Changzhou and Guangzhou (Canton) which all became important commercial centres. The Muslim cemetery in Quanzhou has hundreds of gravestones with inscriptions in Arabic, Persian and Chinese, commemorating settlers from the Yemen, Persia and Central Asia who died and were buried there.<sup>1</sup>

The composition of China's population was profoundly affected by the political and social changes brought about by the Mongol conquests of East and Central Asia in the thirteenth century. On their expeditions westward to conquer Central Asia, the armies of Chinggis Khan and his successors sacked major Islamic centres including Bukhara and Samarkand and transported sections of the population including skilled armourers, craftsmen and enslaved women and children back to China, where they were settled as servants of Mongol aristocrats. When the Mongols established their Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) to rule China, they used Central Asians as border guards, tax collectors and administrators, finding them more loyal than the Chinese population they had conquered. In the Mongol perception of society in China, Mongols were the elite, but the Muslims from the steppes of Central Asia came next in the hierarchy and were considered superior to both the Chinese population and the non-Chinese minorities who lived in south China.

***It was during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) that the Muslim population of China became permanently settled***

It was during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) after the defeat of the Mongols that the Muslim population of China became a permanently settled rather than a transient community. Muslims of Central Asian origin again played a prominent role as tax collectors, administrators and traders, but this time they were under Chinese rather than Mongol jurisdiction. Islam was tolerated, missionaries from Central Asia and Arabia made their way into China, and Nanjing, the first Ming capital, became celebrated as a centre of Islamic learning and culture.

***China's Muslims began to acquire a reputation among their Manchu and Han rulers as a fierce and rebellious minority***

The Manchus, former nomad pastoralists who had established a state to the north-east of China, conquered China in 1644 when the Ming was near to collapse and threatened by bandit rebels and ruled as the Qing dynasty until 1911. China's Muslims began to acquire a reputation among their Manchu and Han rulers as a fierce and rebellious minority. There was sporadic resistance to the Qing conquest of the Muslim regions in the late 17th century, but it was in the late 19th century during three outbreaks of bitter and brutal communal violence, usually known collectively as the Muslim rebellions, that this reputation was firmly established. From 1856 to 1873, Muslims in Yunnan rebelled against Chinese rule and their leader, Du Wenxiu, declared himself the ruler of an independent Muslim kingdom. The insurrection in the north-western provinces of Shaanxi and Gansu which occurred between 1862 and 1878 was crushed by the forces of the Manchus and the Hui Muslim population was drastically reduced and faced the real possibility of extinction. From 1873 to 1877, the region around Kashghar and part of northern Xinjiang was ruled as an



***This series of insurrections devastated the border regions of China and left behind a legacy of mutual suspicion between Muslims and Han Chinese***

independent state after the rebellion led by Yakub Beg. Finally, conflict between Muslims and local Han landlords and officials led to a further period of serious disorder on the Gansu and Qinghai border in 1895. This series of insurrections devastated the border regions of China and left behind a legacy of mutual suspicion between Muslims and Han Chinese and Chinese officials have ever since feared the possibility of Muslim separatism.<sup>2</sup> This separatism became a reality in the 20th century when independent Muslim states were briefly established in Xinjiang, in the Kashghar region in the 1930s and the East Turkestan Republic, based on Yining in the north-west of Xinjiang in the 1940s, to which the Uyghurs of Xinjiang look back as a brief golden age of independence which ended with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949.<sup>3</sup>

Maintaining ethnic and religious identities in the PRC, an atheist state, was problematic. Although there was a policy of recognising the distinctive identities of ethnic minorities, the aspiration of the CCP is that there should be only one pan-Chinese identity *Zhongguoren*. Islam was tolerated, albeit under the strict control of the CCP in the 1950s, but it suffered greatly, as did all religions, during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s. Mosques were closed down or destroyed and imams were imprisoned. All minority ethnic and religious identities disappeared from view. They rapidly re-emerged in the post 1979 Reform and Opening *gaige kaifang* period, which is associated with Deng Xiaoping, demonstrating that they had not been erased from the consciousness of the people. Ethnic and religious minorities became increasingly confident during the 1980s and 1990s. For example the Chinese-speaking Muslims, the Hui people began to use their Arabic names openly in addition to their Chinese names, viz. Sharif Wang Yongliang. Mosques were rebuilt and re-opened and the ancestral tombs of Sufi *shaykhs* were re-established, marking out the territory on which they stood as Islamic.

## **CHINA'S NORTH-WEST FRONTIER: THE EASTERN END OF THE SILK ROUTE**

Although there are important Muslim communities throughout China, especially in the South-western province of Yunnan which has borders with both Burma and Vietnam, it is the north-west, in the areas now administered as Gansu province and

the Ningxia Hui and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regions which has the most distinctively Islamic culture.

The administrative capital of Shaanxi province, Xi'an is often considered to be the beginning of the Silk Route, the network of trading routes that carried silks and other high-value commodities to the Middle East and Europe. It was the capital of the Chinese Tang dynasty but now has a large Muslim quarter that has developed around an imposing mosque built in the Chinese style in dark stone and timber that can be dated back to the thirteenth century.

The province of Gansu, to the west of Xi'an, still has a considerable Muslim population, built up in the 150 years since the depredations of the insurrection and its repression by the Qing government. The provincial capital, Lanzhou, boasts a number of mosques, the largest of which was rebuilt in the 1980s in a Central Asian style, very different from the Chinese architecture of traditional mosques such as the one in Xi'an. Linxia on the way out from Lanzhou to the Tibetan border was known as China's little Mecca in the mid nineteenth century under its earlier name of Hezhou when it was the stronghold of Muslim forces in the insurrection against the Qing dynasty. It was a centre of Islamic scholarship and the area around Linxia was the fertile ground in which many diverse and quarrelsome Sufi brotherhoods flourished. It remains an important centre for trade between China and the Tibetan communities of southern Gansu and the Muslim Hui are still the intermediaries.

The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region was carved out of Gansu in 1958 to give the Hui a nominal homeland. The main mosque in the regional capital, Yinchuan was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and a montage of photographs showing its destruction and reconstruction hangs on the wall of a shop in the rebuilt mosque. Tongxin, further south in Ningxia has an Arabic language school, symbolic of the importance of Arabic to Muslims in China as elsewhere in the Muslim world but also there for practical purposes, to train Hui translators and interpreters who will assist with China's attempts to build up commercial contacts with the Arab world.

**The Xinjiang  
Uyghur  
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the PRC**

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is the official Chinese name for the region known to Uyghur nationalists as Eastern Turkestan (*Sharqi Turkistan*) and, with Tibet, is one of the two most contested territories within the boundaries of the PRC. Although China had exercised some degree of control over parts of what it used to refer to as *Xiyu*, the Western regions, the territory was only completely integrated into China in the late nineteenth century after an insurrection and a period of clear independence. Yakub Beg, who was from Khokand on the western side of the Pamirs, declared himself the ruler of an independent Khanate based on Kashghar. He extended his influence into northern Xinjiang, prompting the invasion and occupation of Ili by Russian forces. Within the Qing court there was a prolonged debate on whether Xinjiang was worth recovering from the "rebels" led by Yakub Beg. After the suppression of the uprising of the Hui Muslims in Gansu in 1873, the government finally agreed on the reconquest of Xinjiang. The forces of Yakub Beg were defeated by the armies of the Qing in 1878, and Xinjiang was formally incorporated into the Chinese empire as a province in 1884 at the time of the intense British and Russian imperial rivalry in Central Asia known as the Great Game.<sup>4</sup>

The most significant cities in the political history of Xinjiang are the regional capital, Urumqi, Kashghar in the South-west of the region and Ghulja in the north-west. Urumqi (Dihua or Tihwa in Chinese) was the main administrative and garrison town for the imperial governments of China. Kashghar (Kashi to the Chinese) is the main centre of Islam and Uyghur culture in southern Xinjiang and was the base of Yakub Beg's rebellion and the seat of a short-lived independent government in the 1930s. Ghulja (Yining in Chinese) is the main urban centre of an area that has Kazakh, Mongol and Russian communities as well as Uyghurs and was the capital of the

independent East Turkestan Republic from 1944-1949, the period from which present-day separatists draw their inspiration. Ghulja was also the setting for the most serious rising against the rule of the Chinese Communist Party in February 1997.

## **BORDERS: THE CHINESE EMPIRE**

The borders of the Chinese empire reached their greatest extent under the Emperor Qianlong (reigned 1735-95). Although even a cursory examination of Chinese history reveals that China's borders have varied from dynasty to dynasty and that there have been many periods of division when two or more competing dynasties have ruled the country, the territory acquired under Qianlong has been taken as the natural limits of China by all subsequent rulers, including the Nationalist Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party, although in the 1950s the CCP did accept that Mongolia was no longer part of China.

## **BORDERS: SINO-SOVIET BORDERS 1949-1991**

The borders between China and the Soviet Union were essentially those of the Chinese and Russian empires as they expanded, respectively westwards and eastwards from the late 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The boundaries in the Amur river region, where Siberia and North-eastern China meet, were established by the treaties of Nerchinsk (1689) and Kiakhta (1727). The frontiers in the north-west of China, between what is now Kazakhstan and Xinjiang are largely determined by mountain ranges which are difficult to cross but areas of dispute still remain and boundary negotiations between China and its Central Asian neighbours have been continuing since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

When the CCP came to power in 1949, and the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance was signed on 14 February 1950, it was assumed that China was to be added to the Soviet bloc and that there would be no border problems between fraternal communist states. However, the close relations implied in the Treaty were never really established, and China under Mao Zedong began to take an independent political line in the mid 1950s. The attempt at speeding up economic growth by mass mobilisation in the 'Great Leap Forward' of 1958, incurred the disapproval of the USSR, scientific and technical experts from the Soviet bloc were withdrawn from China in 1960, and the USSR began a polemical war that finally led to border clashes between the rival armies in 1969 on both the Xinjiang border and the Amur river. Lives were lost on both sides.

The borders between China and her Central Asian neighbours were effectively closed after serious disturbances in the Yili region of North-western Xinjiang and a migration into the USSR. The 1962 Yili disturbances, including the insurrection of May 29<sup>th</sup> and the mass exodus westwards from Xinjiang of Kazakhs and others, arose out of protests at the grain rationing system, Han Chinese immigration and competition between the military land reclamation units of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps and local residents for scarce agricultural land, water and pastures.

## ***Russian and Soviet influence in Xinjiang had been strong for many years***

Among those who fled to the USSR were senior political and military officials appointed by the CCP, almost all Kazakhs or Uyghurs. Many of these became involved in the establishment of a Turkestan Peoples Liberation Committee that acted as a focus for émigré political activity and became the basis for a number of organisations run by political exiles. Some Chinese sources quite simply blame Soviet agents for the exodus and accuse them of having a long-term plan to subvert the region, using ethnic and social ties with Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uyghur people inside the USSR. Russian and Soviet influence in Xinjiang had been strong for many years. Xinjiang in the 1940s under Sheng Shicai had been very close to Moscow and there is a significant ethnic Russian population resident in Xinjiang. A propaganda campaign to persuade the population of northwestern Xinjiang that life was much better in the Soviet Union had

been under way for some years, with printed pamphlets, radio broadcasts, letters and parcels of food and clothing sent across the border.<sup>5</sup>

During the 1950s, China and the USSR were officially fraternal socialist states but relations had already come under serious strain after Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 in which he denounced the excesses of Stalin, which Mao took as a threat. Soviet scepticism at Mao's policies, in particular the 'Great Leap Forward' and mass collectivisation became clear at the Moscow Conference of Communist Parties from around the world in 1960. Soviet and allied technicians were withdrawn from China that year, marking the beginning of what was to become known as the Sino-Soviet split, which was never resolved before the collapse of Soviet power in 1991.

**"Xinjiang is ours, the Han Chinese have occupied our land"**

On and around 10 April, small groups of people from Tacheng (Qoqek) county crossed the border into the Soviet Union. The numbers grew, people from other counties became involved and the exodus reached its peak at the end of May. On 29 May there was a major disturbance at the bus station in Ghulja where people were waiting to take the bus to Korgas, close to the border with what was then the Kazakh Autonomous Republic of the USSR. The office of the bus station was damaged and the crowd broke into the offices of the local government and party organisations, damaged equipment and removed documents from the Foreign Affairs Office. Weapons belonging to the armed forces were looted and a number of armed personnel and party officials were injured. Among the slogans shouted during the riot were: "*Xinjiang is ours, the Han Chinese have occupied our land*", "*Down with the Communist Party*" and "*Exterminate the Chinese.*" From that time onwards, posters and leaflets calling for the establishment of Uyghurstan were constantly circulated throughout Xinjiang.

According to some Chinese sources, the Soviet deputy consul in Ghulja visited Tacheng/Qoqek many times between January and April 1962 and met at least 6,000 people, offering invitations, residence permits and other documents to assist their migration to the Soviet Union and protected protesters inside the consulate. The Soviet authorities opened their borders in the counties of Chochek/Qoqek, Korghas, Chagantokhay and Dorbujun to let in the refugees, who numbered something like 56,000 in total. Most of those who left were local farmers, workers and herdsmen and they took with them property including over 30,000 head of livestock, but there were also government officials and party cadres and from this group emerged the anti-Chinese resistance that grew outside the borders of the PRC.<sup>6</sup> This episode exacerbated the Sino-Soviet dispute and the borders were effectively sealed and remained so until the collapse of Soviet power in 1991.

**BORDERS:  
CHANGES  
AFTER 1991**

A highly publicised tour of southern China by the reforming leader of the CCP, Deng Xiaoping, in January and February 1992 and his call for accelerated reform also had profound consequences in Xinjiang. In June 1992 reports of a confidential "*Central Document Number 4*" mentioned plans for the opening of cities in the northwest and southwest border regions (Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi and Yunnan) for cross-border trade.<sup>7</sup>

**Border trade has stimulated business throughout Xinjiang**

In September 1992, Prime Minister Li Peng timed an inspection tour of Xinjiang to coincide with the Urumqi Border and Local Trade Fair, demonstrating a high level of support for cross-border trade and economic and technical cooperation with the CIS by visiting the Korgas trading post on the border between Xinjiang's Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture and Kazakhstan with local political leaders.<sup>8</sup> Li explicitly linked his visit with Deng Xiaoping's southern tour, which he described as a "*spring breeze blowing through China, deepening and advancing reform.*"<sup>9</sup>

During 1992, a number of border towns were designated as trading posts. Korgas was officially opened on August 18 with 500 stalls and trade estimated at over 300,000 *yuan* daily. Border trade has stimulated business throughout Xinjiang, including Kashghar – already an important centre for trade with Pakistan. Pakistani merchants are regular visitors to Kashghar, in trade delegations and individually, operating out of shops deep in the bazaar quarter.<sup>10</sup> The total value of border trade in the period from January to November 1992 was in the region of US\$220 million, an increase of 359% on the 1991 figure.<sup>11</sup> More border trade centres were planned in Qapaqal, Huocheng and Zhaosu counties to cater for traders crossing over from Almaty and other parts of Kazakhstan.<sup>12</sup> *People's Daily*, reporting from Urumqi in February 1997, summarised the situation to date.

*Xinjiang has lost no time in implementing the strategy of 'opening up on two lines, with priority given to areas along the border', by utilising 15 border posts and the Eurasian continental bridge, attracting a tremendous [amount] of funds from the state and various provinces.*<sup>13</sup>

The Urumqi Trade Fair was considered to have been a great success, and in the nine days from 2-11 September, business worth over US\$1,790,000,000 was transacted, made up of US\$655 million export contracts for sugar, cereals, edible oils, clothing and household goods and US\$644 million import contracts for iron and steel, chemical fertiliser, motor vehicles, farm machinery and aluminium.<sup>14</sup> Of over 5,000 registered delegates to the fair, 1,683 were from 38 foreign countries, including the CIS, Pakistan, India, Iran, Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Macao, Mongolia and Poland. Twenty-seven Chinese provincial level administrations and 29 Chinese overseas trading companies were represented.<sup>15</sup> The atmosphere of the Trade Fair was interesting. Commercial and government buildings were decorated with bunting, and banners in Chinese, Russian and occasionally English called for “*the world to get to know Xinjiang and Xinjiang to get to know the world.*” Foreigners in Urumqi were approached and addressed in Russian as it was assumed that they were all from over the former Soviet border.<sup>16</sup>

**Cross border commerce became a reality for the first time in thirty years**

Cross border commerce became a reality for the first time in thirty years. There was small-scale trade with trucks, buses and vans making the difficult journey across the mountains and also business on a much larger scale, which included investment by Chinese enterprises in Kazakhstan. This trade rekindled links between families and communities that had been separated since the early 1960s. It also enabled cultural and religious organisations to link up and this was to give considerable support to the growing separatist movement in Xinjiang.

## IDENTITIES

Islamic identities in China are complex as they include elements of native place, language, culture, lineage groups and the membership of Sufi and other religious orders within Islam.

Ethnic groups *minzu*, are determined by the state and can mask and sometimes confuse identities. China today gives official recognition to 59 separate ethnic groups that are known in Chinese as *shaoshu minzu*, and this is often translated into English as “*nationalities*”, reflecting the fact that the Chinese concept was based on the Soviet Union’s *natsionalnost*, mini-nations which were allocated their own territory within the Union. A Turkic-speaking individual from Kashghar would be classified as an Uyghur by the state and that *minzu* designation would appear in his passport. He might identify himself as a Kashgharlik, as a Muslim and as a member of the Naqshbandi order. Nevertheless people in North-western China do identify themselves with the official designations and customs and dress correspond closely to these designations.

**MUSLIM  
IDENTITIES:  
HUI**

Unlike the other Muslim groups, the Chinese-speaking Hui have settled throughout China in large numbers and can be found in every province and almost every town and city. However, there are significant concentrations of Hui people in two regions of north-western China: in Gansu province where an area to the west of the capital, Lanzhou, is designated the Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture; and in Ningxia, once part of Gansu, but designated a Hui Autonomous Region, a level of administration equivalent to that of a province, in 1958. According to the 1990 census, the total Hui population of China was 8,602,978. In the Hui communities of Gansu and Ningxia in the northwest, Islam is closely woven into the fabric of everyday life. Hui in southern and south-eastern China have retained less of an Islamic identity and have assimilated more closely with the local Han population, in spite of the fact that their Muslim identity goes back further.

**MUSLIM  
IDENTITIES:  
UYGHUR**

The Uyghurs (also spelled Uighurs) are the largest single ethnic group in Xinjiang, where the majority of them live, although there are also Uyghurs in Kazakhstan and other parts of the former Soviet Union and small émigré communities in Turkey and Germany. The total Uyghur population of Xinjiang today is approximately seven million. Most Uyghurs also identify themselves by the oasis town from which they originate such as Kashghar, Yarkand, Karghalik or Turpan. Uyghurs were traditionally involved in oasis agriculture that distinguishes them from most of the other Turkic-speaking peoples of the region like the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz who were still nomadic pastoralists. A group of Uyghurs who migrated into Gansu in the ninth century speak a variety of Uyghur, influenced by Mongolian and Chinese and not now intelligible to the Uyghurs of Xinjiang. They are known as Yellow Uyghurs and have remained Buddhists, being far enough east to have avoided Islamisation.

**MUSLIM  
IDENTITIES:  
KAZAKH**

The Kazakhs of Xinjiang are closely related to the inhabitants of the neighbouring state of Kazakhstan. Many families have relatives on both sides of the border, partly as a result of the great migration of 1962 when Kazakhs fled Xinjiang to avoid the programme of collectivisation that was being implemented as part of China's Great Leap Forward. Chinese and Soviet Kazakhs continued to be separated after this by the Sino-Soviet dispute, which began in 1960 but became public knowledge three years later. The dispute effectively closed the borders between China and its Central Asian neighbours, but after the collapse of Soviet power in 1991, old relationships were re-established and many families which had been divided for over thirty years were reunited. Traditionally, Kazakhs were herdsmen and their lifestyle, culture and physical appearance are close to those of the Mongols, with whom they claim kinship. There is also a Kazakh minority community in the west of Mongolia. The total Kazakh population of China, almost all of whom live in Xinjiang, was recorded as 1,111,718 in the 1990 census.<sup>17</sup>

**CONCLUSION**

The opening of China and the collapse of the Soviet Union have brought profound changes to the border region between the two countries. In official pronouncements, governments on both sides of the border have emphasised the military and political cooperation and economic development that has been taking place since the early conflict. However, it is clear from the study of confidential documents from state organisations and from discussions with local scholars that, in private, governments accept that regional and ethnic identities, which are still evolving, remain a significant part of the complex jigsaw of relations in the region and must be taken into account when policy is being formulated.

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## Notes

- 1 Chen Dasheng, 1984
- 2 For the history of Hui Muslims, see Lipman, 1997 and Dillon, 1999
- 3 This period of Xinjiang's history is covered in Forbes and Benson
- 4 Chu, Wen-djang, 1966: 163-196.
- 5 Zhang Yuxi, 1997: 334-336.
- 6 Zhang Yuxi, 1997: 334-336.
- 7 *China Quarterly* 131, September 1992, 'Quarterly Chronicle and Documentation', p 848 citing *Ta Kung Pao* Hong Kong.
- 8 *Xinjiang Ribao* 4/9/92; *China Daily* 7/9/92.
- 9 *Xinjiang Ribao* 4/9/92; SWB/FE/1480 8/9/92.
- 10 Malmström, 1992, observations, Kashghar, September 1992.
- 11 *China Daily* 12/9/92; *China Daily Business Weekly* January 10-16 1993.
- 12 *China Daily* 25/9/92.
- 13 FE 2872 March 20 1997.
- 14 *China Daily* 12/9/92.
- 15 *Xinjiang Ribao* 11/9/92.
- 16 Personal experience Urumqi September 1992
- 17 Benson and Svanberg 1998, is an excellent introduction to the Kazakh people.

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