
Uighuristan: Really Part of “One China”?

Rishi Kapoor

Everything about this place does not belong. Not to China, not to tourists, not even to the people themselves. Some may call it the hinterland or frontier; it is a rocky otherworld that passes for Mars in my photographs. A trading post in the middle of the Old Silk Road, this place was rubbed by many different cultures and many different epochs in history—Chinese, Indian, Persian, Turkic, Russian, and British, among many others. Never belonging to one, it was free to resist patiently; like the barren rocky soil, this place was rubbed and worn, but never moving.

Three of my classmates and I flew from Beijing to spend our fall break in Kashgar. The plane in which we flew was unlike any other we had taken in China: a relic from the Soviet era, with tacky upholstery and a really high ceiling. Chinese signs were nailed into the wall above the lighted Russian ones. Only later would I realize how fitting this plane ride was for the place we were about to visit. Outside the window we saw round mountains in a desert, with heaps of snow seemingly dumped on them. What kind of place was this, with no bustle, no overcrowded cities, and no smog like the rest of China?

The land was barren, for sure, but it was not dead. It wore everyone’s face with wind and dust. After a few days, my skin became leathery, and I could never completely shake off the

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rocky powder from my pants. The Uighur hospitality and the inevitable rapture of this dry and dreamy land was beginning to suck me in.

This vast land from the Taklamakan Desert and the Pamir Mountains to the hidden lakes and the fruit-bearing oases has been populated by Uighurs for more than 2,000 years. Locals commonly refer to the area as Eastern Turkestan, or Uighuristan.

Uighuristan was first acquainted with the Chinese centuries ago. Han Chinese invasions into the area began in 104 B.C. Up until 751 A.D., the Chinese invaded six times, but controlled portions of the territory for only the first 157 years of this 855-year time span. For the remaining 700 years, Uighuristan remained free. Not war, but coexistence with the Chinese traders along the Silk Road dominated the relationship during that time.

But most Chinese do not know this history. On the way to the airport, we informed our cab driver that we were heading to Kashgar, China's westernmost city on the Old Silk Road. "You may have difficulties in Kashgar," she warned. "They speak a different language, and they are uncultured." This was our first encounter with such blatant Chinese racism. Ironically, the Chinese are often the first to point out American racism while pontificating about the peaceful "one China." By Chinese standards, though, Uighurs may well be barbaric. They practice a "backward" religion, Islam, and eat with their hands—a sure mark of savagery. How could these people ever live on equal terms with the glorious 5,000-year civilization of China?

One of the most surreal aspects of Kashgar was the bazaar. One need only visit the Sunday market in Kashgar,

which attracts anywhere from 50,000 to 150,000 people a week, to know that the Old Silk Road never died. Here Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek, Uighur, Chinese, Tajik, and Pakistani traders converge in an orgy of buying and selling. Wide vacant streets were swollen with people. Nothing is absent in this Central Asian bazaar: fabrics, hand-made shoes, spices, peanut brittle, dried fruits, animal skins, Uighur knives, musical instruments, women with covered faces, women with bare faces, screaming children, hats of every sort, fine crafts, coats and of course, rugs. The visual array is matched only by the loud bustle and fragrance that overwhelm the senses. After a few minutes at the place, we lost all sense of direction and time.

Thankfully, just as we decided to pry ourselves from the bazaar and explore more of the town, we came across a resident of the area named Abdullah who was eager to show us around while practicing his English. First, he brought us to the animal market, which was teeming with camels, mules, horses, cows, lambs, and sheep. People examined the animals, counting their teeth, checking how well they moved and how healthy they were. Butchers bought animals for their restaurants; farmers sold sheep; everyone haggled. This place never left the medieval era.

Later we ate dinner with Abdullah and his friend Taher. Abdullah shared his opinions about the Chinese. He wanted an independent and free Xinjiang. He whispered his strategy to us. "We will watch Tibet and Taiwan and Kashmir. When something happens in Taiwan, we will start pressing for our independence." He talked as if it were a great secret that was a true prophecy. The triumph in his smile as he tilted his head back said it all. The Chinese did not belong here.

The Chinese named this territory the “Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region” (XUAR) in 1955. “Xinjiang” means “new territory.” The Chinese Communist Party consolidated military control over the region between 1949 and 1955, and has always kept a policy of repression to fight any “splittist” Uighur perpetrators—a term that recalls the humiliation of foreign attempts to break up China in its time of shame: the nineteenth century. The name “Xinjiang” had been given to the territory in 1884 under Manchu conquest, but between then and 1949 the Uighurs staged forty-two armed revolts and declared independence in 1933 and again in 1944. The Chinese are wary about Xinjiang’s attitude with good reason. Because of security interests embodied in the Taklamakan Desert’s oil and gas

Soviet-style buildings with tiled walls were erected to house residents and provide more space for shopkeepers, but the Uighurs refused to live in them. Local time is a full two hours behind Beijing’s, but in One China everyone must use Beijing time. But only financial institutions comply with the quirky rule.

Such seemingly petty policies betray Beijing’s apparent design to outnumber the Uighurs in their own homeland. Historically, the province belongs to Central Asia, for the Uighurs are a Turkic people whose language, custom, and cuisine are very close to those of their newly independent neighbors: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Currently, though, Uighurs make up a mere 47 percent (8.7 million) of the population of Xinjiang, and the

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reserves and in the nuclear testing sites, Beijing does not see Uighuristan’s independence as a policy option.

However, Chinese interests have not changed the Uighurs’ minds. Abdullah and Taher later took us to the new, and first, grocery store in town. They were excited to peruse the aisles. New and fancy foods were now available in Kashgar. And yet, there were no customers; Abdullah and Taher told me it is because they sell only Chinese things. China is a different country and a different society—indeed, a different civilization. What logic is there in selling Chinese goods to Uighurs?

Beijing’s influence seems to be characterized only as coercion in Xinjiang.

Han Chinese constitute another 41 percent (7.5 million), with a sprinkling of other Central Asian ethnicities making up the difference. As late as 1950, Han Chinese did not exceed a tenth of Xinjiang’s population. Nowadays, the provincial capital Urumqi has been effectively Sinicized, with an eighty percent Han population and with all the crude heavy industry and pollution of an eastern Chinese city. The government used its huge state-owned firms to erect Soviet-style cities, gobbling up land, bulldozing over Uighur livelihoods, and solidifying the steel structures of an industrialized future. This future has in store more foreign domination for the rugged province.

Nonetheless, the countryside remains largely non-Han, aside from the military outposts—the only places flying the red flag. These outposts reminded me of colonial times when alien soldiers manned small forts over wide expanses of foreign territory. This impression was reinforced when I learned that the government confiscated people’s guns after the last rebellion a few years ago. Now people worry about wolves eating their sheep.

“But there is no way they can control all these mountains,” Abdul, another Uighur friend, noted wistfully. He told us of his brother, who made a living taking his animals to graze in the mountains in season and descended to warm lodgings when winter came. With the advent of spring, he would head into the mountains again. He was a nomad.

The Chinese are not as interested in life in the mountains. Abdul owned one of the two hotels in Tashkorgan, the last town on the Karkoram Highway before entering Pakistan. It was not really a town, but more of a street with several houses on

either side. It was situated in the so-called “Tajik Autonomous County,” in a valley 3,000 meters above sea level between snowcaps that jutted 6,000 meters into the sky. The day we met Abdul he was forced to close a deal with the other, Chinese-owned, hotel; they bought his property. The Chinese keep moving in.

“They don’t even want to come here, but the government forces them,” Abdul lamented. “They are so dirty. They just throw their noodles and snack bags everywhere. And when you knock on their door, they ask who it is before they open it.” The Chinese are not just foreign—they are uninvited.

Arriving back in Harbin, China, I told a Chinese student about Uighur antipathy towards the Chinese what I had witnessed. “That can’t be! We are One China,” she responded nonchalantly while eating her noodles. How casual One China was to her, and how visceral the concept was to the Uighurs. All I could do was recommend she see the place for herself.