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**The Hui and the Uyghurs:
A Comparison of Relationships with the Chinese State**

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The Hui and Uyghur Chinese Muslim groups are united by common religious practices and the mutual classification as Chinese ethnic minority groups. While both the Hui and the Uyghurs have been equally subjected to social biases, ethnic and religious discrimination and government repression, the Uyghurs have an arguably tenser relationship with the Chinese government than the Hui. This relationship has resulted in restrictive religious practice policies in the Xinjiang region, where a majority of the Chinese Uyghur population can be found, in addition to harsh government crackdowns and restricted social mobility. The difference in treatment between the Hui and Uyghurs can be attributed to a number of factors, the most important being contestation over the Xinjiang region and a sense of Uyghur independence and autonomy relative to the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Chinese Traditions and Han Chinese- A Brief Overview

The Han (汉) Chinese people are the ethnic majority population living within the borders of the current Chinese territory. Their populations are estimated at approximately 94% of the total Chinese population, about 1.3 billion.¹ The fifty-six recognized ethnic minorities in China make up the other 6% of the population.² The identifier of “Han” Chinese is a reference back to the Han Dynasty and the unification that occurred during this time period. The Han people's history dates back to the Han Dynasty, which lasted from 206 BCE to 220 CE.³ The Han Dynasty was notable for conquering a large area of

¹ Maris Gillette, "Violence, the State, and a Chinese Muslim Ritual Remembrance," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 67, no. 3 (2008): 1015.

² *Ibid.*, 1015.

³ Edward Shaughnessy, *China Empire and Civilization*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 28-29.

territory, while simultaneously unifying multiple groups of culturally and ethnically different people during a very early stage of Chinese history.

Their success lies mainly with the continued enforcement of standardizations originally implemented during the short-lived, but highly influential, Qin Dynasty.⁴ These standardizations, particularly the standardization of a written language, created a sense of unity and allowed for communication uninhibited by language barriers. Over the centuries, these early ethnically and culturally different groups of people began to see themselves as part of the larger Han culture.⁵ This history, enhanced by later dynastic contributions and long established broad cultural traditions, has served to establish a clearly defined Chinese ethnic and cultural majority national identity that traces its roots back to China's second and, arguably, most influential dynasty.

Many Chinese people find commonalities in their shared ancient history and common cultural traditions. The prominence of Confucian teaching in Chinese society has strongly influenced Chinese cultural practices. Some refer to Confucianism as more of a religion than a philosophical teaching, "Religion in China was closely intertwined with intellectual life and with the political and social institutions of the nation... the state was committed to the existing faiths, especially Confucianism."⁶

Confucius lived during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty in the middle of the Warring States Period of Chinese history (770-221 BCE).⁷ His ideal society was based on, what he saw as, the success of the Zhou Dynasty prior to the fractionalization that occurred during the Warring States Period. Confucius considered order, harmony and stability to be key

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Raphael Israeli, "Muslims in China: The Incompatibility between Islam and the Chinese Order," *BRILL T'oung Pao*, 63, no. 4/5 (1977): 306-307.

⁷ Shaughnessy, *China Empire and Civilization*, 26-27.

for a functional society. He stressed the importance of filial piety, social hierarchy within the family and humility.⁸ Confucian values have had a lasting impression on Chinese society that still influences modern China. The importance of Confucianism extended beyond familial interactions to include Chinese society, which impacted both government function and the definition of Chinese social classes. Confucian concepts, such as filial piety and a social hierarchy, established a “superior and subordinate” relationship that provided the basis for Chinese social interaction.⁹ People were expected to interact in society according to Confucian values, showing respect for elders and superiors and expressing humility when in influential and important positions of power.

Chinese social classes were traditionally divided into four main groups: scholar officials, peasants, artisans and merchants.¹⁰ These social classes were based on contributions to society, ranking from the highest to the lowest. Merchants made up the lowest social class, seen as “leeches” of Chinese society; they benefited from the contribution of others and gave little in return.

Appointment to the Chinese bureaucratic government system was based upon the knowledge of Confucian classics tested by an extremely difficult and thorough examination system, that only became more elaborate in later dynasties.¹¹ International relations between China and its neighboring countries were heavily influenced by Confucian thought as well. The Chinese maintained a strong “superior versus subordinate” mentality, expressing Chinese superiority because of an adherence to Confucian values that promoted a more advanced society, coupled with a belief that

⁸ Ibid., 78-79.

⁹ Ibid., 78-79.

¹⁰ Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 12.

¹¹ Shaughnessy, *China Empire and Civilization*, 86-87.

inferior societies should pay tribute to the Chinese. The Chinese frequently referred to themselves as the “Middle Kingdom” and others, from countries to non-Han ethnic groups, as “barbarians”.¹²

Although much of this history occurred during the ancient imperial dynasties, it is still relevant to modern Chinese thought. A society as ancient as China, that has traditionally stressed the importance of history and the past, has deeply rooted beliefs, traditions, identities and prejudices. This history has, in many ways, contributed to some of the modern day conflict experienced between Han Chinese and Chinese minority Muslim groups.

Religious Freedom in China-

With the establishment of the PRC in 1949, communism took hold of the country.¹³ The Communist government has generally maintained a strong atheistic stance, strongly encouraging absolute loyalty to the state instead of any broader religious identification. During the early years of the PRC, religious practices were largely forbidden and removed from Chinese society.¹⁴ Today, to be a member of the Communist Party an individual must renounce their religious beliefs and adopt an atheistic stance (Bureau of Democracy 2011). However, Article 36 of the Chinese constitution does allow for religious freedom, “No State organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The State protects normal

¹² Ibid., 84-85.

¹³ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 438.

¹⁴ Ibid., 439.

religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State ("Constitution of the People's Republic of China" 2004).” The constitutional definition of “normal religious activities” is intentionally broadly defined. It allows the Chinese state the freedom to regulate religious institutions and activities, while maintaining involvement in the operation of these organizations.

In general, religious freedom in modern China has been allowed to a point, with the Chinese government going even as far as to encourage it in more recent times.¹⁵ The Chinese government recognizes the benefits that can be gained from supporting religious practices, particularly with regard to international trade and relationships with countries in areas like the Middle East. The PRC has reason now, more than ever, to allow greater religious freedom and support for Islam, because the regions where Muslims live in higher populations within China, particularly the Xinjiang autonomous region, are rich in extremely valuable natural resources that the Chinese state heavily relies on.¹⁶ In addition, supporting religious activities allows the government to openly monitor these groups in the interest of preserving national security and national unity. If a leader becomes too radical or a group begins to become problematic, the government will simply replace the leader with a party sympathizer and refer to the act as “liberation”, hiding government involvement behind popular voice.¹⁷

The Relationship Between Han Chinese and Muslim Minorities-

¹⁵ Thomas DuBois, "Religion and the Chinese state: three crises and a solution," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 64, no. 3 (2010): 350.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 351.

To address the matter of ethnic minorities, *minzu* (民族), the PRC followed the example of the Soviet Union, with some modifications, recognizing and designating specific minority groups to specific regions.¹⁸ A *minzu* in China is identified by a shared “common territory, language, form of economic livelihood and psychology”.¹⁹ To the government and the Chinese population, *Minzu* people are those that are not Han Chinese, but are “racially and culturally distinct.”²⁰ There is a sense of separation from the Han Chinese state for these minority groups. The distinction of being different is not necessarily always beneficial to the minority populations, but the government has allowed these groups some freedoms and separation from the state. The autonomous region is different from a typical Chinese provincial government because the region is allowed some autonomy in self-governing and a notably higher population of the minority group compared to the national majority Han population that can be found in that particular region.²¹ This is especially notable with the gradual implementation of the One Child Policy in the autonomous regions that is still more lenient than the general policy applicable to the average Chinese citizen. The government also offers autonomous regions greater freedoms with regard to regulation and representation in the national government. Minority populations today receive government aid for housing and religious institutions, in addition to educational grants and special consideration for university admission. The way the PRC went about designating minority groups is known to have occurred in a haphazard manner that did not fully consider all of China’s minority

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 349-350.

¹⁹ Gillette, "Violence, the State, and a Chinese Muslim Ritual Remembrance," 1015.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Raphael Israeli, *Islam in China*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 45.

groups. They are known to be reliant upon “historical inaccuracies”, folklore, prejudices and do not consider regional concepts of identity.²²

Chinese Muslims have been navigating the difficult balance between embracing their Chinese nationality, especially in the case of the Hui Chinese, and adhering to the Islamic faith, since their introduction to Chinese society in the Tang Dynasty. Islam came to China by way of merchants and mercenaries traveling along the Silk Road. Not only were these people considered to be foreign “barbarians”, they were of the lowest rank according to the Confucian social hierarchy, because merchants were considered to contribute the least and benefit the most from society.²³ Chinese Muslims have always understood their relationship with the larger Chinese community as part of a delicate balance.²⁴ The differences between the Han Chinese majority and the Muslim minorities have been the root of the conflict between the groups in the past and the present.

In China, there is a problem of racism and prejudice created by long established beliefs that rely more on popular legend than fact. In history Chinese Muslims were often stereotyped as savage, heartless and greedy.²⁵ They were placed on the margins of society and ridiculed for their religious beliefs, particularly their dietary restriction from consuming pork. In a more positive light, Chinese Muslims are also credited with courage, energy and enterprise, but this is overshadowed by a reputation of being shrewd and sly in business.²⁶ An old Chinese proverb states, “eat the food of a Muslim but do not believe his talk”, in the belief that a Chinese person should take what they are offered by

²² Gillette, "Violence, the State, and a Chinese Muslim Ritual Remembrance," 1015.

²³ Israeli, *Islam in China*, 45.

²⁴ James Frankel, "'Apoliticization': One Facet of Chinese Islam," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 28, no. 3 (2008): 431.

²⁵ Israeli, "Muslims in China: The Incompatibility between Islam and the Chinese Order," 303.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

the Muslim, but be wary of believing what the Muslim says.²⁷ Even though Chinese Muslims have a long-established history with the Chinese population, these prejudices are still prevalent problems, something one author links to the treatment of minority populations in other countries, like the relationship between the English and the Irish.²⁸ Although, prejudices against minority populations are arguably less obvious in modern Chinese society, they are still a noticeable problem, particularly with regard to education and government and military appointments.

Chinese Muslims have adapted their religious beliefs to accept and participate in Chinese society, “Islam as practiced and understood by Chinese Muslims has been strongly influenced by Chinese culture, ethics, social organization, and history.”²⁹ In ancient times Chinese Muslims typically dressed as the rest of Chinese society, even in modern times Chinese Muslim women rarely wear veils covering their faces. Chinese Muslims speak Mandarin Chinese and practice Islam in Chinese, although, the Uyghurs do maintain their own language.³⁰ Islam in China has even been adapted to embrace eastern tradition and Confucian thought. A necessary condition if a Chinese Muslim had a desire to be involved in the Chinese government or military, in both the past and the present. Traditionally, government positions required a strong knowledge of Confucian teachings, and in modern times, government positions require that an individual place their status as a party member and a supporter of the government before their religious affiliations to the extent of renouncing their religion (Bureau of Democracy 2011).

Military appointments, similarly, rarely accommodate dietary restrictions with regards to

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 305.

²⁹ Gillette, "Violence, the State, and a Chinese Muslim Ritual Remembrance," 1015-1016.

³⁰ Osman Abdullah Chuah, "The Cultural and Social Interaction between Chinese Muslim Minorities and Chinese Non-Muslim Majority in China: A Sociological Analysis," *Asian Social Science*, 8, no. 15 (2012): 267-273.

pork.³¹ Government run educational institutions in China are strictly secular in nature and are contributing to a problem of reduced religious knowledge and adherence in the younger generations.

Both the Hui and the Uyghur minority groups are identified in part as a minority group because of their religious affiliation to Islam. To be Hui in Chinese literally means to be a Muslim actively practicing Islam.³² Han Chinese people will use the term 'Hui' interchangeably between describing the ethnic minority group and the larger Muslim population. However, it is becoming more common in modern times for Chinese people to identify themselves as Hui, but not practice Islam.³³ The minority identification is gradually becoming less associated with religious practices, due in part to the atheistic nature of the Chinese state and the lack of religious education in Chinese schools.³⁴

The Hui Minority Group-

The Hui (回) Chinese minority group are primarily located in the Ningxia autonomous region in China, while populations of the minority group are scattered across the country. Their total population is estimated at about 11 million (Bao 2013). "The word 'hui' also means "return to" in Chinese and hence, it means the religion of Hui is to return to Allah... Although all Hui are Muslims, not all Muslims are Hui or from the tribal groups mentioned as there are also non-Muslim Han who converted to Islam and are known as Han Hui."³⁵ There is a significant population of Hui people in the city of

³¹ Ibid., 272.

³² Ibid., 267.

³³ Gillette, "Violence, the State, and a Chinese Muslim Ritual Remembrance," 1016.

³⁴ Ibid., 1016.

³⁵ Chuah, "The Cultural and Social Interaction between Chinese Muslim Minorities and Chinese Non-Muslim Majority in China: A Sociological Analysis," 267.

Xian in Shanxi province, as well as in Gansu province.³⁶ The Ningxia region of China is located in the Northwest part of China, bordering Shanxi province and surrounded by Gansu province.

The Hui people consider themselves to be the original Muslim population in China. An important Hui religious text called the *Han Kitab*, acknowledges Islamic teachings while respecting Han culture.³⁷ The name of the text itself, *Han Kitab*, is the merging the “Han” Chinese language with the Arabic word for “book”, *Kitab*. “These writings reflect a tacit attempt by the Chinese Muslim literati to portray themselves, their community and their faith as “orthodox” in both Islamic and Confucian terms. Their purpose was to educate readers, both Sinicized Muslims and curious non Muslim literati, about Islam.”³⁸ It is very important to Hui Chinese to associate themselves with the larger Islamic community and their own Han identity. The Hui Chinese aspired for cooperation and peaceful cohabitation in Han Chinese society. Their focus is on integration and a peaceful harmonious existence, which is best illustrated by the culture’s legend of origin.³⁹

The *Han Kitab* contains a famous legend of the origins of Islam in China. According to the legend, one night the Taizong emperor of the Tang Dynasty had a terrible dream that a evil dragon attacked the empire, only to be driven off by a bearded man wearing a turban. The next morning, upon speaking to his advisors about the dream, the emperor was told of a new people living in the west that wore turbans and grew beards, under the leadership of a great “Sage”, the prophet Mohammed. The emperor sent

³⁶ Gillette, "Violence, the State, and a Chinese Muslim Ritual Remembrance," 1015.

³⁷ Frankel, ""Apoliticization": One Facet of Chinese Islam, 426-427.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

an emissary to the prophet immediately, requesting that the prophet aid the emperor in protecting the empire from the dragon. The prophet, unable to go himself, sent his maternal uncle, Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, in his place. Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, after aiding the emperor remained in China with his two companions, where they continued to contribute to order and social harmony in China. They all married Chinese women and the Hui people are said to be descendants of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, his companions and their Chinese wives.⁴⁰

This legend provides the Hui with an established history of Muslim origin that gains legitimacy through association with a direct relative of the prophet, Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas. By suggesting that the prophet personally sent his maternal uncle and companions to aid China, the Hui are also claiming a direct connection to the prophet and his teachings, giving Chinese Muslims an important role in the Islamic faith. Connecting the arrival of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas and his companions with the reign of the Taizong Emperor also establishes a positive connection between the reign of a powerful, revered and well known Chinese historical figure with the arrival of Islam. The prophet sent his representatives to aid China and only served to contribute to promoting stability and harmony in Chinese society. Of course this history is just a legend or religious myth, but it still provides important insight into how the Chinese Muslims perceive their relationship with the larger Islamic community, ummah, and the country where they have made their home for hundreds of years.⁴¹

The Hui people appear ethnically similar to Han Chinese and define their differences based on an adherence to the Islamic faith and a strong commitment to

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

refraining from consuming pork.⁴² Pork is a staple ingredient in the average Chinese individual's diet and the consumption and preparation of food are important aspects of Chinese culture. Refraining from consuming pork is a noticeable difference in Chinese society. In general, the Hui consider themselves to be a combination of both Chinese and Muslim, "The Hui share the same language, culture and social way of life with the non-Muslim Han but unlike the Han, the Hui are also part of the world wide Muslim ummah. The faith and practice of Islam also make the Hui different from the non-Muslim Han."⁴³ This identity is a crucial aspect of the positive relationship between the Chinese state and the Hui minority population. The Hui already associate themselves as part of Chinese society and are interested in peaceful coexistence.

Politically, the Hui have historically accepted the governing of the Chinese state, both during the dynasties and after the establishment of the People's Republic of China.⁴⁴ It is a significant difference in that the Hui do not feel a need to establish an Islamic state or a state that upholds Sharia law. They have found a way to live under the control of a non-Muslim government while continuing to practice their beliefs since ancient times. The Hui recognize the delicate balance that must be maintained in relation to the Chinese government. Peaceful cooperation is necessary for the survival of the culture and their relative religious freedoms.⁴⁵ The Hui are careful to remain within the constraints of what the Chinese constitution refers to as "normal religious activities".

For the Hui, there is a sense of division between themselves and the larger Muslim ummah. This is due to many factors, but most significantly a lack of contact

⁴² Gillette, "Violence, the State, and a Chinese Muslim Ritual Remembrance," 1015-1016.

⁴³ Chuah, "The Cultural and Social Interaction between Chinese Muslim Minorities and Chinese Non-Muslim Majority in China: A Sociological Analysis," 267.

⁴⁴ Frankel, "'Apoliticization': One Facet of Chinese Islam, 431.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

between the Hui and the ummah.⁴⁶ Contact today is still a problem, but not nearly as repressed as during the early years of the Communist Party's control when the country was much more isolated. There is a strong prejudice against the Hui as well within the ummah, which may result from the Hui's long-standing relationship with Han majority China and inclination towards policies that encourage peaceful coexistence and recognition of the superior strength of the Chinese state.⁴⁷ The Hui people rely on Mandarin rather than Arabic and religious education is limited due to general party policy geared towards religion-free public education. There is also a strong pressure under the control of the Communist state to place national identity ahead of any religious or ethnic identities. This relates to the careful balance the Hui minority must maintain between assimilation and retaining distinct cultural and religious beliefs.⁴⁸ All of these factors create a relatively politically inactive Islamic group that differs in many ways from other parts of the ummah.

The Chinese government, in accordance with their practice of recognizing minority groups, has allowed the Hui people to maintain some form of autonomy within the country. Though, the government continues to support policies that encourage assimilation, the integration of Hui and Han populations has already essentially occurred successfully. The Hui continue to practice religiously, but are careful to remain within the confines of what the state would consider "normal religious activities". The Hui usually only protest when a larger sense of injustice has occurred, like the publication of an offensive book in the early 1990s that resulted in mass protests across the country, but

⁴⁶ Chuah, "The Cultural and Social Interaction between Chinese Muslim Minorities and Chinese Non-Muslim Majority in China: A Sociological Analysis," 269.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

particularly in Beijing.⁴⁹ The Chinese government responded, surprisingly, in favor of the Hui minority, banning the publication of the book and responding leniently to the laws broken during the protests. The Hui are in some sense the ideal religious minority group for the Chinese government. They have adapted to Han Chinese society and are in no way concerned with independence or autonomy. The Hui have incorporated Chinese society into their culture and religious beliefs in a successful manner that best suits a harmonious cooperation with the Chinese government, making their relationship relatively positive.⁵⁰

The Uyghur Minority Group-

The Uyghur minority populations are mainly located in the Xinjiang region of Northwest China. The area is largely desert, with oasis cities emerging in the region sometime during the Tang Dynasty and later during the Yuan Dynasty, when the Mongols controlled and fostered interaction between much of Asia, Europe and the Middle East.⁵¹ During both dynasties the Silk Road, which went through the Xinjiang region, was the main trading route linking the east and west. The original people of Xinjiang were traders and merchants from the Middle East, traveling to the east in order to trade with China. The merchants living in the Xinjiang region remained separate from the Chinese state for much of their history of existence.⁵² During the middle of the Tang Dynasty the Chinese emperor was actually forced to pay tribute to the Uyghurs at one

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ James Frankel, "Benevolence for Obedience: Policies on Muslims in Late Imperial and Modern China," *ASIANetwork Exchange*, 6, no. 2 (2009): 26.

⁵¹ Emily Hannum, and Yu Xie, "Ethnic Stratification in Northwest China: Occupational Differences between Han Chinese and National Minorities in Xinjiang, 1982-1990," *Demography*, 35, no. 3 (1998): 323.

⁵² DuBois, "Religion and the Chinese state: three crises and a solution," 350.

time in order to repay their assistance during the An LuShan Rebellion that almost destroyed the dynasty.⁵³ Although the Uyghur population in the Xinjiang region consisted mainly of young adult male traders, there was little intermarriage with the neighboring Chinese populations. The Uyghurs remained uninterested in interaction with the Chinese state beyond trading. The Chinese state was uninterested in establishing control over the region, because it held little value to the state. Foreign merchants populated the cities of Xinjiang, and although some may have been wealthy, they were of the lowest social class according to Confucianism and were considered to be barbarian outsiders. The Chinese state had no reason or motivation to include the region as part of Chinese territory for much of ancient history. The land itself at the time was of little value, because the Chinese state was so strongly dependent upon farming, which the desert landscapes of Xinjiang were unable to support (Teague 2009).

The people of Xinjiang include several different ethnic groups, the largest of which are the Uyghurs, with a population of about 10 million (Bao 2013). Chinese Uyghurs are of Turkic descent. They appear different from Han Chinese, with more European than Asian features. Chinese Uyghurs are typically taller, larger and have more angular facial features. It is not uncommon for Chinese Uyghurs to even be blond haired and blue eyed (Teague 2009). In a country that supports such a large ethnically similar population, these physical differences, while sometimes subtle, are readily noticed and can be a source of discrimination. It is also one way that Uyghurs identify themselves as different from the larger Chinese population and has prevented them from successfully

⁵³ Shaughnessy, *China Empire and Civilization*, 33.

integrating into Chinese culture and society.⁵⁴ There are several other Muslim minority populations living in the Xinjiang region, including the Kazaks and the Tajiks.⁵⁵

Although these Muslim minority groups share a common religion, they remain separate and distinct from one another, practicing different traditions and religious practices in separate places of worship. This lack of unity is an important aspect of the social relationships in the Xinjiang region. While these minority groups share common beliefs, values and aspirations for independence, their lack of cohesion and distinct separation prevent the unity needed to effectively support protests in the Xinjiang region.⁵⁶

Xinjiang experienced independence twice in modern history, once very briefly as the Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkestan in 1933 and again in 1944 as the East Turkestan Republic.⁵⁷ The first independent modern government was short-lived and unsuccessful, being quickly overtaken less than a year later by invading warlords. The second government, established in 1944, was supported by the Soviet Union. This time, the East Turkestan Republic was able to maintain autonomy for five years until 1949, when the Chinese government overtook it.⁵⁸ Shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 Mao Zedong sent PRC troops to the Xinjiang region in order to reestablish Chinese control over the region. The East Turkestan Republic was quickly overcome and integrated into the Chinese state as a province. To further establish a claim

⁵⁴ Frankel, "'Apoliticization': One Facet of Chinese Islam, 431.

⁵⁵ Chuah, "The Cultural and Social Interaction between Chinese Muslim Minorities and Chinese Non-Muslim Majority in China: A Sociological Analysis," 267.

⁵⁶ Yitzhak Shichor, "Blow up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang," *Asian Affairs*, 32, no. 2 (2005): 127.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

in the region, Mao had a nuclear facility built in the province to show its strategic importance to China.⁵⁹

While in the past the region had been of little interest to China, it became increasingly more important in modern times. After establishing power, the PRC began rebuilding China after nearly fifty years of instability, warfare and destruction. The Chinese government sought to reestablish the original territorial borders maintained during the Qing Dynasty, of which the Xinjiang region had been part of. The Chinese government also saw the region as a buffer zone between themselves, the Soviet Union and the rest of the western world. The buffer zone was an important part of isolating the Chinese state in order to protect against external threats and preserve national security.⁶⁰ Most importantly, the Xinjiang region encompasses a wealth of natural resources. These resources became extremely valuable to the Chinese state after the industrial revolution and the importance of coal and oil were discovered. The Xinjiang region holds forty percent of China's coal reserves, one fifth of China's natural gas and identified natural oil, in addition to salt and gold deposits (Teague 2009). The Chinese state is heavily dependent on the region's natural resources, which have brought an abundance of wealth to the province in recent years.

In an effort to integrate Xinjiang province into the Chinese state, the PRC implemented several migration and development programs. The first occurred in 1954 under the "Xinjiang production and construction corps" (Teague 2009). Han Chinese troop and families were encouraged and coerced into relocating to the isolated and removed region in order to increase the Han population in the province and encourage

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

assimilation. Again, in 1962 the government encouraged Han Chinese to move to the region, constructing a railroad to the west and offering food, clothing and housing incentives to those that made the move.⁶¹ For many Han Chinese moving to the far away desert region was a welcome change from the overcrowded conditions in the more populated coastal cities. In addition, during the 1960s and the early beginnings of the Cultural Revolution, many Chinese were embracing, both voluntarily and involuntarily, the concept of reeducation through labor and relocating to the country's lesser developed peasant regions in order to become more proletariat.

The mass migrations of Han Chinese people into the province have had major effects on the cities and minority populations. Han Chinese families are displacing Uyghur workers and families, forcing them to move to the margins of the cities.⁶² Many of the major businesses in the province, particularly oil, are extremely profitable, but are controlled by the PRC (Teague 2009). As a result, oil company employees are typically party members and Han Chinese. In order to become a party member an individual must renounce their religious beliefs, which many Uyghurs are unwilling to do. This has led to a widening gap in the comparative standard of living between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. Many Uyghurs are being forced to relocate to other provinces in order to find low paying factory jobs, while others are forced to take jobs as servants for the wealthy Han Chinese families (Teague 2009). Today, the percentage of Han Chinese living in the Xinjiang region relative to the Uyghur population is almost equal.⁶³ There is a concern of the

⁶¹ Graham Fuller, and Frederick Starr, *The Xinjiang Problem*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University, 2003):5.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶³ Hannum, Xie, "Ethnic Stratification in Northwest China: Occupational Differences between Han Chinese and National Minorities in Xinjiang, 1982-1990, 324.

effects this population displacement is having on the minority Uyghur population and its culture. The displacement is also a major source of animosity between the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese.

The Xinjiang autonomous region was established in 1955 as part of the Chinese government's plan to recognize minority groups in China, granting the region some autonomy from control by the PRC.⁶⁴ The region is recognized also as a Uyghur minority region, without directly recognizing other minority groups living in the province. This has created some animosity between the Uyghurs and other minority populations in Xinjiang, like the Kazaks. Xinjiang's autonomy has been countered, particularly in recent years, by increased government regulation and interference. Most of the province's political officials are Han Chinese Communist Party members. There is little representation of Uyghurs in the Chinese government, both in the province and in the national government.⁶⁵

China's policy towards religious freedom in Xinjiang is much less lenient as well. While the Chinese government is generally heavily involved in the organization and operation of religious institutions in China, they are much more involved in the Xinjiang region than the country as a whole. The number of mosques in the region is strictly regulated, as are the number of religious educational institutions, of which there are very few. Religious leaders are heavily connected to the party and the party continues to maintain strict regulations on who may partake in the pilgrimage to Mecca, which is a state sponsored activity. In Xinjiang, only adult males may attend Mosque and families

⁶⁴ Shichor, "Blow up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang," 133.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

are forbidden from teaching their children about their religion at home under the “Xinjiang Implementing Measures on the Law on the Protection of Minors”(Bureau of Democracy 2011). All children in China are required to attend state sponsored, secular schools. In Xinjiang, the restrictions on worship and religious education are reducing the numbers of practicing Muslims in the younger generations (Bureau of Democracy 2011). This is a problem for many of China’s religious groups, but is particularly noticed in Xinjiang because of the strict regulations.

The Uyghurs are far less integrated into Chinese society than the Hui. There is a sense of separatism and independence still existent in the region. Protests in Xinjiang have received a significant amount of attention in recent years. These protests are linked to demands for greater religious freedom, social equality and independence.⁶⁶ While these protests are infrequent and generally non-violent, the Chinese government has always responded severely to these situations, with extreme force and increases in regulation and security. The Chinese government has always managed to maintain order and control over the Xinjiang region and the protests that have occurred in the past were relatively peaceful. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks in the United States, the Chinese government joined the anti-terrorist campaign in order to label Uyghur extremists in Xinjiang as a terrorist organization and a threat to national security under the name “East Turkistan Islamic Movement”.⁶⁷

After China reopened to the world in 1979 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, many Chinese Uyghurs were reintroduced to the larger Islamic community that they had been separated from for so many years. Some Chinese Muslims, particularly the

⁶⁶ Fuller, Starr, *The Xinjiang Problem*, 5.

⁶⁷ Michael Dillon, "We Have Terrorists Too," *The World Today*, 58, no. 1 (2002): 25-26.

Uyghurs were introduced to and influenced by radical groups in the Middle East, as well as current events occurring in the Middle East and around the world with regards to independence movements (Bureau of Democracy 2011). The Chinese government fears these radical groups as a threat to national security, but also as a threat to the continued control over the region's natural resources. The Chinese government has used the terrorist label for Uyghur radicals to justify many of the policies and government actions occurring in the region. However, the Chinese government has been known to waiver on their stance towards the region and the Uyghur population, at times the Chinese government has associated the entire minority population as terrorist in nature, while when doing business with Middle Eastern countries, the government has been known to downplay the situation in Xinjiang and use state influence and involvement in religious activities to illustrate their support for Islam and religious freedom.⁶⁸ The Chinese government is unable or unwilling to distinguish between peaceful religious activities and threats to national security. As a result, almost all actions and protests in Xinjiang province are interpreted as threatening and responded to with extreme force.⁶⁹ Although, the Chinese government has abused the terrorist group label in order to suit their motives and needs best, due to repeated government insistence of the region's threat, many Chinese people and government officials truly believe the province is unstable and a legitimate threat. This belief, held on a national scale, has only increased animosity towards the Uyghur minority group.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Shichor, "Blow up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang," 124.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

In the summer of 2009 near Hong Kong, two Uyghur factory workers were accused of raping a Han Chinese woman. Shortly after, a riot occurred at the factory, where angry Han Chinese workers beat two Uyghur men to death in their dorm (Wong 2009). About a month later, two thousand Uyghurs organized a protest in Xinjiang, demanding equal treatment and justice for the men who died in the riots. The regional government was completely taken off guard by the protest and was unprepared to deal with the mob of people. At some point, Uyghurs began attacking Han Chinese. Two days later, after reinforcements were brought in, the Han Chinese retaliated, justifying the brutal assault by claiming to be defending the Chinese state against terrorist activity. An estimated 200 people were killed in the riots, with an additional 1,000 injured (Wong 2009). Recently, the trials in Xinjiang have begun to be settled. Several Uyghurs accused of instigating the riot have already been found guilty for their involvement and executed. The riots illustrate the tense relationship between the Chinese government and the Uyghur minority group and the Chinese government's questionable use of the terrorist label for the Uyghur population in order to justify their actions (Wong 2009).

There are many parallels between the situation occurring in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Both experience government oppression and regulation, particularly with regards to religion. Population movements in both provinces are strictly controlled and any forms of protest or social organization are closely monitored and repressed. Like the Dalai Lama in Tibet, Rebiya Kadeer in Xinjiang is an important symbol for freedom and independence in Uyghur society. Kadeer is not a religious leader, but has become a model for Uyghurs living in Xinjiang (Bureau of Democracy 2011). During the economic boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Kadeer

found her fortune in real estate across the province. Her economic success and, more importantly, her life-long involvement in and support of independence movements in the Xinjiang region have made her an inspiration to the Uyghur people and a threat to the Chinese government ("Profile: Rebiya Kadeer" 2009). Kadeer has been exiled from China and accused of terrorist activities by the Chinese government, currently living in the United States. Her continued activism for the Xinjiang people has brought the situation to a global audience and provides a counter to the Chinese government's assertion of the region's threat to national security.

Comparative Relationships and Conflicts-

China's relationship with Chinese Muslims is not universally consistent, nor does it necessarily follow official government regulations and constitutional language. Both Hui and Uyghur Muslims have experienced discrimination, inequality, persecution and repression throughout Chinese history. Their religious beliefs and merchant historical background, coupled with traditional Confucian discrimination against non-Han barbarians, have alienated Muslim populations to the margins of society. Communist China has severely restricted religious practices and discouraged religious affiliation.⁷¹ In modern times, religious freedom is officially granted by the Chinese constitution, but remains heavily regulated by the government. These regulations are unfairly and unequally imposed upon the Chinese people, including the Muslim minorities, in order to protect and serve government interests.⁷² The Hui Chinese and the Uyghurs have a very different relationship with the Chinese government. Although they are both identified as

⁷¹ Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65-66.

⁷² DuBois, "Religion and the Chinese state: three crises and a solution," 351.

Chinese Muslim groups, the Hui are granted greater religious freedom and social acceptance in Chinese society than the Uyghurs.

While still experiencing discrimination and alienation, the Hui Chinese have much more successfully integrated into Chinese society as a whole. Both the Hui and Uyghurs have had contact with China since the Tang Dynasty, however the Hui have attempted, since that time, to integrate into Chinese society. They have adapted their religious beliefs to coexist peacefully in a non-Muslim society and find a balance between embracing their Muslim and Chinese identities.⁷³ Although, this adaptation has led some Muslims to believe the Hui no longer practice true Islam, which has alienated from the larger Islamic community to some extent. The Hui have settled in communities throughout China, although they do have a concentrated population in North-Central China. They appear physically similar to Han Chinese and are much less distinguishable based on physical appearance alone. The Hui are also generally uninterested in protesting and establishing their independence; they are focused on peaceful coexistence and cohabitation. The Hui are careful to keep their religious practices within the scope of the Constitution's "normal religious activities" and maintain a comparatively positive relationship with the Chinese government.⁷⁴ The government has, in return, allowed for the construction of Mosques and schools, provided funding and government support for religious activities and supports pilgrimages to Mecca yearly. All of this is done to appeal to the Middle Eastern countries the Chinese government does business with and maintain

⁷³ Frankel, "'Apoliticization': One Facet of Chinese Islam, 423-424.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

a strong hold over the Muslim religious institutions, as the government does with all other institutions, to ensure government sovereignty.⁷⁵

The Uyghurs have a very different relationship with the Chinese government. They were an independent state for several years before the PRC established a province in the region and, before that, the region was brutally conquered and dominated by the Qing Dynasty for many years. Independence and autonomy are important to the Uyghur people and they have protested on multiple occasions, demanding greater social equality and proclaiming their independence from the Chinese state.⁷⁶ The Uyghur population remains isolated in the Northwest corner of the Chinese territory. Since the Tang Dynasty, the Uyghurs have always maintained their independence and separation from the Chinese state, making little effort to integrate into Chinese society, even when under the control of the Chinese. The Uyghurs appear physically different from the Chinese and are easily noticeable, creating some problems with discrimination. A fear of this independent, nationalistic sentiment and the influence of radical groups from the Middle East have led the Chinese government to implement stricter regulations in the Xinjiang region.⁷⁷ Uyghur protests have been met with strict government regulations and harsh security measures. Religious freedom is much less prevalent in the repressed region. The people are also being pushed to the margins of society by the influx of Han Chinese migrating to the region, contributing to an ethnic economic disparity. The classification of Uyghur extremist groups in Xinjiang as terrorist organizations by the Chinese government has given the government some legitimization for their actions in the region.

⁷⁵ DuBois, "Religion and the Chinese state: three crises and a solution," 351.

⁷⁶ Dillon, "We Have Terrorists Too," 25-27.

⁷⁷ Shichor, "Blow up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang," 124.

These actions have gained the attention of other states, activist groups and human rights organizations in recent years, particularly with the information provided by activists from the region like Rebiya Kadeer.⁷⁸

The problems in the Xinjiang region and the deleterious relationship between the Uyghurs and the Chinese government are a result of continued Uyghur insistence on independence and the Chinese government's invested interest in the region's natural resources. The inability and unwillingness for Uyghurs to integrate into Chinese society, their isolation and resentment of Han migrants and their previous experience as an independent state all contribute to the Uyghurs inability to accept the Han government.⁷⁹ The Han Chinese government has too much at stake in the Xinjiang region to ignore the problems and protests. The rapidly growing Chinese economy and massive population are completely dependent on the region's natural resources, particularly coal and oil. It would be a serious problem if China lost control over a region that holds nearly half of the country's coal supply (Teague 2009). Beyond economic concerns, the Chinese government considers the region to be a part of the original Chinese state, as it also considers Taiwan and Outer Mongolia, two independent states bordering China. Losing Xinjiang could mean problems in the other unstable autonomous regions within China's borders, specifically Tibet and Inner Mongolia, where similar events are occurring to those in Xinjiang. China would "lose face" by losing the territory, by appearing weak and unable to control their people. "Losing face" may, in fact, be the most serious concern for the Chinese state. In Chinese culture, "face", or public appearance, is an important aspect

⁷⁸ Dillon, "We Have Terrorists Too," 25-27.

⁷⁹ Shichor, "Blow up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang," 133.

of social interaction that has carried through to modern times. Beyond all of these considerations, it is important to recognize that China has always had firm control over the Xinjiang region. The protests, while sometimes disastrous, as was the case in 2009, are a minimal threat at best. The populations are simply too small, isolated, and are far too disorganized to stage a successful protest. The increased Han Chinese population in the region is also diluting the independence of the province and integrating the region into Chinese society.⁸⁰

Conclusion-

The Hui have a relatively better relationship with the Chinese government because they are ethnically similar, have been a part of China for hundreds of years and have adapted their religious beliefs to peacefully coexist with a non-Islamic government. The Hui are also more interested in maintaining the ability to practice within the constraints of “normal religious activities” as defined by the government and remain on relatively positive terms with the government. The Uyghurs have been independent from China for significant parts of their history. They have, in recent history, established their own nation-state on two separate occasions. The Uyghurs maintain a separatist and independent stance relative to the Chinese state, resenting mass migrations of Han people, displacement of Uyghur workers and unfair and unequal treatment. Increased interaction beyond the Chinese state with external influences post-1974 has only added to further demands for equality and independence. The Chinese state continues to maintain a strong hold over the region because of their invested interest in the regions natural

⁸⁰ Shichor, "Blow up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang," 133.

resources, encouraging assimilation with the mass migration of Han people and labeling protests in Xinjiang as terrorist actions.

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