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Conflict in Xinjiang: The Uighurs and the Chinese Regime

Enver Tohti

RESEARCH PAPER
February 2015

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Enver Tohti worked, until 1998, as a surgeon in the Railway Central Hospital of Urumchi. Alarmed by the overwhelming number of cancer patients, he sought to find out the cause. After conducting an undercover investigation and producing a documentary film "Death on the Silk Road", Dr. Tohti was exiled for his exposure of the disastrous human impact of Chinese nuclear testing in Lop Nor. Since then, Dr. Tohti has successfully brought international attention to nuclear victims in Xinjiang. Subsequently, deeply concerned by the Chinese Communist Party's spread of a false image of the Uighurs, he decided to take up another challenge to campaign for the truth.

Recently, Dr Tohti has denounced the systematic harvesting of organs from political prisoners in China for the illicit human organs market.

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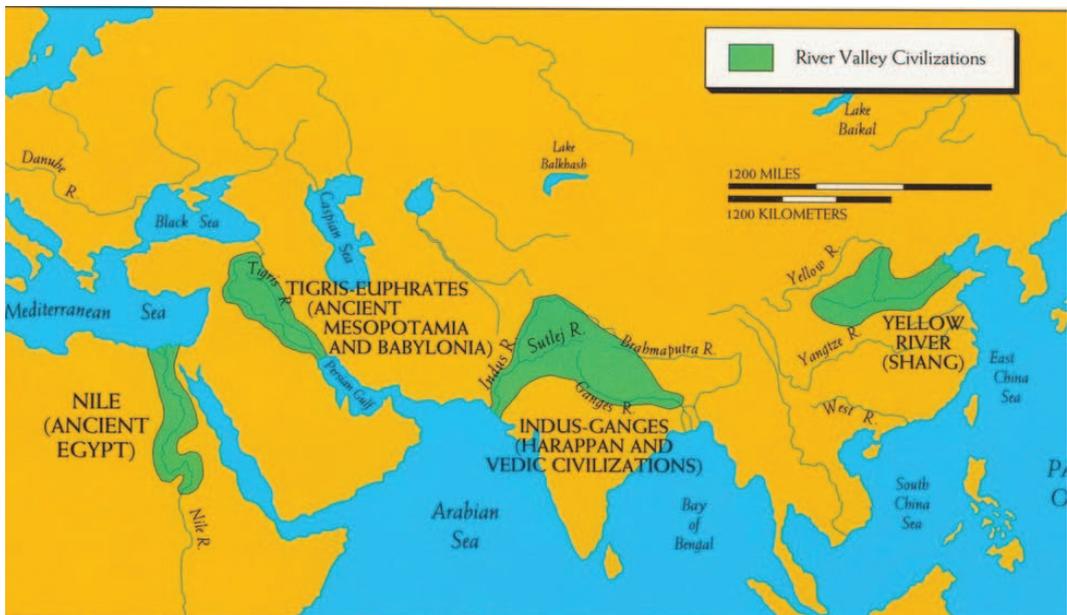
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The Chinese: Chinese civilization and its culture

The history of China allegedly dates back to as early as 4000 BC. Here we take a brief look at the Chinese of antiquity. China is a country with a long and rich history, an ancient civilization. According to Sima Qian's account, Chinese civilization began with the legendary sage-emperors Huang and Yan in the area of the Yellow River Basin known as Yellow Ear Plateau. These two tribes gradually merged after centuries during the Xia Dynasty. This new alliance established a state in the region of the Yellow River Basin, which they believed to be the center of the world, so the state was named the "Middle Kingdom".



Chinese civilization has taken millenniums to take shape, has endured the challenges of time and space, and is still carrying on strong. Like Indus Valley civilization, China's strength lied in the fact that it was cut off from the rest of the world. Surrounded by oceans, mountains and by the Gobi Desert, China's homeland was virtually inaccessible to outside invaders.

Having little contact with the outside world, Chinese civilization developed a

strong Sino-centric world-view. The Chinese believed that China was the most important and greatest of all civilizations, and that they were the center of the Earth.



Confucianism is an ethical and philosophical system, sometimes described as a religion, that developed from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551 – 479 BCE). Confucianism originated as an “ethical-sociopolitical teaching”, but later developed into the official state ideology of the Han. Since then, most of the Chinese emperors have used a mix of legalism and Confucianism as their ruling doctrine.



The core of Confucianism is humanistic, or “the secular as sacred”, as the philosopher Herbert Fingarette describes it. Confucian thought focuses on the cultivation of virtue and maintenance of ethics. In short: “obedience, not resistance”.

The Chinese not only developed a complicated rational civilization but also formed a strong sense of “otherness”. It was expressed in the maxim “Those who are not our kin are sure to be of a different heart”.

The definition of a nation today is “a large body of people united by common descent, history, culture or language, inhabiting a particular state or territory”. At a quick glance the Chinese seems to fit all those criterions to be called a nation.

The Uighurs: Uighur civilization and its culture

As for the Uighurs, the topic gets a bit complicated. Let the historians deal with the history and sort out what the term “Uighur” meant historically and its use to-

day. In short, the Uighurs came to this land during the 9th century, after the collapse of the Uighur Khaganate in Mongolia.



Over the centuries, those Uighurs of the past, like water, merged into the Taklimakan desert, and receded from the pages of history. The Turkic language they spoke gradually merged with the other regional dialects and continued in an evolved form.

This historical name was revived in 20th century when the Russian historian Sergey Malov recommended, at the Tashkent Conference in 1921, that the Xinjiang Turkic people - including some locals from Tarim Basin (Xinjiang) - be named “Uighurs”. This group of people decided to call themselves as “Uighur” thereafter, although the delegates noted that the modern group referred to as “Uighur” were distinct from the old Uighur Khaganate.



However, the term “Uighur” was not used in Xinjiang until 1934, when the governor Sheng Shicai became the military governor of the province. Sheng adopted the Soviet theory of ethnic classification and was the first to use it in reference to the Turkic Muslims of the region.

This official ethnic name was inherited by the People’s Republic of China and has been used ever since. In other words, “Uighur”, a tribal name of the past, was used to denote a cultural community of modern times.



What about Uighur civilization and culture? Let us see what an observer of the last century, Demetrius Charles de Kavanagh Boulger (1853-1928), had to say about the Uighurs:

“These people are in the most backward state of intelligence that is possible to imagine human beings to be capable of. In physical strength and stature they are, perhaps, the most miserable objects on the face of the earth, but their social position is still more deplorable. Some of their cus-



toms are of the most disgusting character, and their dwellings, such as they are, are of the rudest kind and subterranean. Travellers who have seen them in the larger cities say that all the rumours that have been circulated about them do not exaggerate the true facts of the case, and the most pitiable part of the matter is that they have become so resigned to their degraded position that they are averse to any measure calculated to improve their existence. They have been compared to the Tibetan Bhots, but these latter are quite superior beings in comparison with them. They are treated with contempt and derision by all the neighbouring peoples...” (Demetrius Charles de Kavanagh Boulger, *The Life of Yakoob Beg*, London, 1878).

As descendants of nomads, Uighur civilization and culture belong to the past. Shaped by the forces of circumstances, Uighur civilization could be described as is a simple and emotional civilization.

Over the centuries, the Silk Road has become the battleground of great powers. The coexistence of different religions and traditions has formed a unique culture of its own. Footprints of their influence can be seen all over the place.

By definition, the Uighurs are in the process of forming a nation. In other words, the Uighurs do not even qualify as a nation yet.

The Rise of China and the Chinese Communist Party

As we have mentioned, Chinese philosophy stresses obedience and not resistance. Over the centuries the Chinese may have won a few battles, but have lost all wars with foreigners. Still, they have successfully expanded their territory. Whoever conquered China subsequently got lost in it.

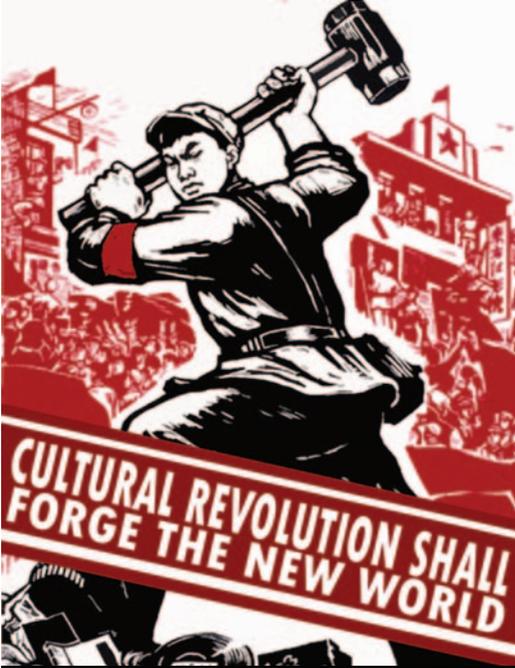
The Manchurians defeated the Chinese army and conquered a nation ten times larger in size. Now how many Manchurians can you find around the world? About Genghis Khan, Chinese claim the Mongols were one of their minorities who ruled the country; therefore, the Mongolian empire was the Chinese empire.

During the Japanese invasion of China, many scholars suggested not to fight, but to welcome the Japanese, to have them live inside China with the Chinese. 50 years later the whole of Japan was Sinolized. This strategy has been called “victim mentality”. Thus, inheriting the land occupied by foreign powers has been legitimized.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was born in this culture and it skillfully used this strategy. Its great sense of nationalism and its emphasis on “otherness” has shaped the CCP’s nature. Violent revolution, the core element of the Communist Manifesto, has further enhanced the brutality of the CCP. Generated by chaos and tyranny, the CCP will die if peace is achieved. Therefore, the pursuit of violent revolution is their agenda. They constantly have to find an enemy to fight against.

It may be easier to find an enemy to fight in wartime, but it should be difficult

in peacetime. This is not the case for the CCP. The CCP is more than capable of finding their enemies. When there is no enemy the CCP will create one to keep its struggle going forward. In the early years of the CCP, classic struggles such as the Anti-Rightist movement and the Great Cultural Revolution were examples of such creation of enemies. And the Uighurs have become the latest candidate.



Uighur Nationalism

Is there a genuine Uighur nationalism? We have explained that the Uighurs have not yet formed a nation, so how could they have developed a genuine nationalism? The answer is no, there is not a genuine Uighur nationalism.

See what some observers got to say about this issue:

1) Uighur nationalism is technically impossible because of far-reaching secret police surveillance.

- “The police system here, as we soon discovered, is a most intricate network, and it worked with a marvellous secrecy, which nobody understands, and everybody dreads. As a consequence the people are silent and suspicious. House-to-house visitation is discouraged in a peremptory manner known to the governors, whilst private entertainments are watched by their agents. The people see a spy in every man they meet, and accost each other with polite commonplaces, and courteous bows and curtsies in place of conversation. They know their words and actions are noted at every turn, and they conduct themselves accordingly. No traveller or merchant can move from one place to another, or quit the country, without a permit. And no subject can go from one town to another without a passport” (Henry Walter Bellew, *Kashmir and Kashgar : A Narrative of the Journey of the Embassy to Kashgar in 1873-74*, London, 1875).

The current rulers in Xinjiang have not changed this way of ruling. The neighbourhood surveillance system invented by the CCP has further strengthened the rulers’ control over the population. It is hard to imagine, in such a society, an organized activity in favor of Uighur nationalism.

2) There is no willingness to develop Uighur nationalism.

- “A very intelligent merchant of the town replied as follows to questions put to him, as to the Chinese and native rulers, and it will be seen that it was especially favorable to the claims of the Chinese as the better masters.” (Demetrius Charles de Kavanagh Boulger, *The Life of Yakoob Beg*, London, 1878).
- “As for the general character of the population, I found the Chinese Tartar honest, timid, and, to speak plainly, bordering upon stupidity; his relation to the inhabitants of the other cities in Central Asia is about the same as that of the Bokhariot to the Parisian or the Londoner. Extremely modest in their aspirations, my fellow-travellers have yet often delighted me by the enthusiastic terms which they used when they spoke of their poor homes. The splendour and lavish expenditure discernible in Roum and Persia, and even Bokhara, displease them; and although they are governed by a people differing from themselves in language and religion, still they prefer their own to the Musselman government in the three Khanats. But it would really seem as

if they had no cause to be dissatisfied with the Chinese” (Árminius Vámbéry, *Travels in Central Asia*, London, 1864).

3) Incapacity to establish an independent Uighur state.

- “These cities had been continually at war with one another, until several of the leading personages with the Yarkend chief, Ibrahim Bey, at their head, desirous to put an end to the dissensions, called in the Chinese, who, after long hesitating, assumed the sovereignty, and have governed these cities upon a different system from that in force in the other provinces of the Celestial Empire” (Árminius Vámbéry, *Travels in Central Asia*, London, 1864).
- “...the same witness went on to say ‘Yes, perhaps so. There were many rogues and gamblers too, and people did get drunk and have their pockets picked. But so they do now, though not so publicly, because we are under Islam, and the *Sharia* is strictly enforced’. This very graphic piece of evidence gives a clearer picture of the two systems of government, than perhaps paragraphs of explanatory writing; and, to return to the immediate subject before us, it shows that Yarkand has deteriorated in wealth and population since the Chinese were expelled from it fifteen years ago”. (Demetrius Charles de Kavanagh Boulger, *The Life of Yakoob Beg*, London, 1878).
- “Under the Chinese rule Yarkand appears to have been the most flourishing city in the Kashghar territory, but since the conquest of the country by Atalik Ghazi, and the selection of Kashghar as his capital, it has greatly declined in wealth and importance. And many years must elapse before it can recover its prosperity, unless the intolerance of the present Islam code is very much relaxed in favour of unbelievers in its perfection.” (Demetrius Charles de Kavanagh Boulger, *The Life of Yakoob Beg*, London, 1878).

Those observations were conducted when only 1% of the population were Chinese, and yet the Uighur did not want to be alone.

Some may argue that the Uighurs have twice established twice the East Turkestan Republic (ETR). This is true, but the first one only survived a few months; the second was the most influential one. Let us provide some background information on how the second ETR was born.

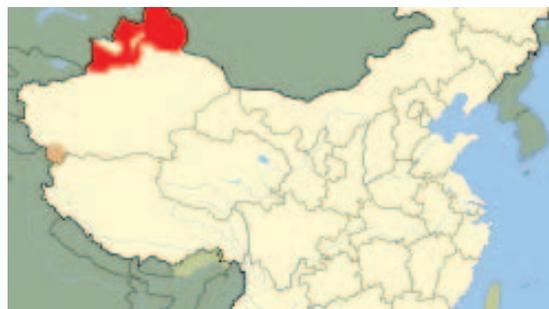
It all began with the USSR nuclear test program. This program started in 1940. Soviet nuclear scientists first did the theoretical work, then started looking for uranium. And they found it in Koktogai, in the East Turkestan Altay region. At that time, this region was controlled by the local lord Osman Batur. The Soviets needed uranium and Osman needed weapons to foster his position.

The USSR nuclear test programme had to be kept secret from the Chinese. So the deal was on. Osman got his weapon delivered by the Mongolians, and he successfully kept the Chinese away from the region. No one knew how much uranium was shipped to Kazakhstan. This secret was well-kept until the mine controlled by

Osman Batur had run out. The Soviets then stopped supplying weapons to Osman, and turned to another local Kazak Lord for uranium.



Osman Batur, who was very upset, turned to the Chinese, and the Chinese immediately informed the Americans. US intelligence kicked in. It sent in weapons and gold, and Osman started attacking Russian trucks in the aim of jeopardizing the USSR nuclear programme. The Soviet sent in more KGB agents with more weaponry to Osman Batur's rival tribe, and with help of those KGB agents, the ETR was established.



Thus, the Second ETR was no more than a by-product of the Soviet Nuclear testing program. The claims of Uighur nationalism start from here.

After USSR discovered uranium in Kazakhstan, especially after they successfully tested the first nuclear bomb on 29 August 1949, they stopped supplying the ETR, then the ETR had no choice but to befriend the CCP's Westward-marching

army. The Chinese called it “peaceful liberation”. There was no fighting with the CCP, and also no invasion.



By looking at the relations between the CCP and the Uighurs we have overturned the Chinese myth about East Turkestan, and demolished the sand castle of Uighur nationalism.

Terrorism in Xinjiang: unanswered questions

So far, we have mentioned historical facts. Now we turn to the current situation. To understand China one must first imagine a prison. It is normal for a country to have prisons, but China is a prison that has a country. And the CCP opened a window on its wall, allowing you to look through the window from a distance, and whatever you see is the image the CCP wants you to see.

The trouble began with a conversation in early November 2001 between Mary Robinson, the then UN Human Rights Commissioner, with Jiang Zemin. Robinson expressed concerns about the new crackdown, sensibly warning that it might produce further resentment and lead to further terrorism. The Chinese president is said to have “listened carefully”, though not to have offered a comment. But a response soon followed: the creation of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).

Lack of evidence has forced us to analyze the situation based on what we have seen from different windows. In China, rumor always tells the truth. In Chinese: 谣言——遥遥领先的预言 (“Rumors - ahead of predictions”).

Chinese security discourse, as Professor Patrick Mayer of Cambridge University described, has changed over time as the term “trinity of trinities” suggests:

1) “Trinity of Authority”: the People, the Communist Party of China, and the government. Since the early years when the CCP took over power it emphasized authority and asked for obedience. This was the approach before the “reform and opening” policy of Deng Xiao Ping. The police was the key security instrument.

2) “Trinity of Virtue”: Stability, Unity, and Prosperity. This approach emphasized asking people to make money and not talk about politics. The Chinese People’s Armed Police Force was the key security instrument.

3) “Trinity of Evil”: Extremism, Separatism, and Terrorism. Diverting the attention of the masses by creating a national enemy. This approach was developed after 9/11 and the conversation with Mary Robinson. Counterterrorism special forces and the People’s Liberation Army are the key security instruments.

The following are some case studies:

- The April 1990 Baren uprising. This is the only one which had links with outsiders. It was categorized as an uprising connected to the separatist movement. One of the Chinese soldiers, who later claimed asylum in US, said that his company slaughtered everyone in one village.
- The February 5 1992 Urumchi bus bombing. It was categorized as an act perpetrated by the separatist movement.
- The 1995 Urumchi bus bombing. It was categorized as an act perpetrated by the separatist movement. According to a local newspaper, a CIA agent was arrested two weeks after the bombing. That agent was of Chinese origin.
- The 1996 Urumchi train station bombing. Two trains were involved, casualties were few, but 3000 tons of oil were burned. This incident was never reported, and was covered up.
- The February 1997 Yili incident. People protested against the CCP’s decision to ban a *Meshirep* gathering. It was categorized as a riot.
- The September 9 2000 explosion. A military vehicle carrying expired ammunition exploded in Urumchi, killing more than 60, and wounding about 200. This incident was not widely reported and was not blamed on Uighur separatism. The Prime-Minister Zhu Rongji was in Urumchi at that time. He was

there to tackle corruption, and this made the Xinjiang governor Wang Lequan unhappy. The next day, the Prime Minister left Urumchi. ETIM was created at this time.

Whatever happened in Xinjiang was said to be a “terrorist attack”. However, more questions than answers about these so-called terrorist attacks still remain unanswered.

Incidents in subsequent years also raise questions:

- The July 5 2009 Urumchi Riots. Questions: 1) the first group of protesters were carrying China’s national flag, and they were the first ones that got killed. The images quickly disappeared; 2) those dead or wounded had one thing in common: a return ticket from Karshgar to Urumchi. Why?; 3) the Armed Police Force were deployed from as far as Shanghai and arrived in Urumchi on July 1. Why?; 4) A Uighur journalist reported to a government officer that something was about to happen, 7 hours in advance, and was ignored. Why?. Rumors alleged that the incident was connected to a power struggle inside the Politburo.
- The October 28 2013 bombing in Beijing’s Tianmen Square. The Politburo’s seven-man Standing Committee’s were having a secret meeting nearby. Also, the bombing took place just ten days before the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee. Why?
- The April 30 2014 Urumchi train station bombing. Was it coincidence that President Xi Jinping was visiting Urumchi? Doesn’t this bombing remind us of the September 9 2000 military vehicle explosion?

Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption drive has targeted the interests of Jiang Zemin’s group. Jiang Zemin was the head of the Central Military Commission of the CCP, many generals were promoted by him, and are therefore loyal to him. This has created huge obstacles for Xi Jinping. The tensions over the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea were typical reflections of the intense infighting inside the Chinese leadership. Diplomatic turbulence is something Xi Jinping does not want to see now.

Xu Caihou was Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and represented the Northeastern Army Group, and Guo Boxiong, another Central Military Commission Vice Chairman, represented the Northwestern Army Group. Both Army Groups are strong and powerful. Since both men were sacked, tensions over the Senkaku Islands and the South China sea have diminished.

Under Jiang Zemin’s leadership, positions in the Army were for sale. For example, the position of Head of an Army had a price of ten million yuan; the price for commander of a Division was one million yuan. The extent of corruption is so deep that almost the entire leadership may face investigation. Therefore, it would not be strange to see many PLA officers jumping from buildings.

The prime purpose of terrorism and terrorist attacks is to bring maximum horror to the society with minimum efforts. In Xinjiang, we have seen more attackers killed than their victims. I would say that the police forces knew the attacks were coming. In other words, the attacks were artificial. Thus, it is safe to say that what happened in Xinjiang was not original but artificial.

A Chinese saying states: “The insider knows the ropes, while the outsider just comes along for the ride”. The CCP is fooling the whole world. A foreigner living in China has created a Chinese-style distich (couplet) that jokes about the poor quality of Chinese products and the phenomenon of Chinese politics: “Highway, motorway, railway, way way to die. Officer, producer, professor, sir sir to lie. Welcome to China”.

This paper was presented at the seminar “Multiethnic China: the Case of Xinjiang and the Uighur People”, held on February 5, 2015, and organized by the Gino Germani Institute and the Link University Foundation.