

**DEVELOPMENT OR DESTRUCTION?: THE UIGHURS OF  
XINJIANG AND CHINA'S OPEN UP THE WEST PROJECT**

**BY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Chinese government launched the Western Development Program (WDP) in 1999 in response to the wealth disparity between eastern and western China. This paper examines the WDP's effects on the Uighurs, a Turkic Muslim minority group in Xinjiang province. Broadly, this essay addresses the relationship between economic development and nationalism, examining Beijing's claim that the WDP will improve the Uighurs' economic situation, hence diminishing Uighur nationalism. I argue that the literature does not support this claim. Economic growth will not diminish Uighur nationalism. Moreover, the WDP's benefits in Xinjiang have flowed to Han Chinese migrants, leaving the Uighurs economically disadvantaged. Beijing has encouraged the migration of large numbers of Han Chinese to Xinjiang. Combined with Uighurs' sense of historical injustice at the hands of China and Beijing's ongoing repression in Xinjiang, CCP policies exacerbate Uighur anger and cause nationalism to increase.

**Keywords:** Xinjiang; Uighurs; Western Development Project; economic development; nationalism

*To my parents*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Chinese government launched the Western Development Program (WDP) in 1999 in response to the wealth disparity between eastern and western China. This paper examines the WDP's effects on the Uighurs, a Turkic Muslim minority group in Xinjiang province. Beijing has explicitly stated that a chief goal of the WDP is to improve the economic development of ethnic minority groups resident in the west, and that doing so will reduce ethnic nationalist tensions. This essay addresses the theoretical relationship between economic growth and a decrease in nationalism, and applies this theory to the case of the Uighurs.

The phenomenal economic growth experienced by China over the last two decades has been unevenly distributed throughout the country. The growing division in China today between its richer and poorer citizens is a contentious point in the governing Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) policies. This gap exists within cities and regions but it also physically divides the country almost down the middle. The eastern seaboard provinces were targeted in the early 1980s by the CCP leadership in Beijing as the first to receive the benefits of economic opening. This has resulted in the effective impoverishment of some fifteen western provinces, more than half of China's land area.

In response to the widening wealth disparity, in 1999 the CCP officially began the Western Development Project (WDP), variously known as the Go West Plan or the Open



Up the West project. This project was essentially a plan to jumpstart the west's economy through state provision of funds and infrastructure and economic stimuli needed to open the west to the global economy. Billions of yuan have been allocated to the WDP and early assessments cautiously note growing GDP in the west.

The western provinces house the majority of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) ethnic minorities. There are 55 official ethnic groups in China, classified as such by the CCP, alongside the majority Han, who make up some 97 percent of the total PRC population. Although dozens of minority groups in addition to Han Chinese living in the west are affected both by the west's economic underdevelopment and by the subsequent changes brought by the WDP, it is Xinjiang province and the largest ethnic minority therein, the Uighurs, who are the focus of this paper.

Xinjiang lies in the far north-western corner of China. It is the single largest province, representing one-sixth of China's total land area (Becquelin 2004, 359). Geographically, it has long been considered the "crossroads of Central Asia" (Moneyhon 2004, 496): it lies between China to the east, Tibet to the south, Mongolia, Russia, and Kazakhstan to the north, and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and both Pakistan- and India-administered Kashmir to the west. Xinjiang is home to thirteen official minorities including several with ties across Xinjiang's borders: Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks. But its single largest ethnic group is the Uighurs, a Turkic Muslim group who have historically inhabited the oases of the area.

Xinjiang's peculiarity lies in the fact that it is both a poor western province, although it has ample natural resources, and is the location of one of the major security

challenges to the CCP. Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Uighurs have been one of its most restive groups, challenging Beijing's authority whenever possible. In the last fifteen or twenty years in particular, Beijing has recognised this threat and has taken at times brutal steps to crush it. The interplay between Uighur nationalism, the CCP's repression, and the economic growth of Xinjiang is what makes this area such an interesting and useful case study.

Broadly, this essay will address the question of the relationship between economic growth and nationalism, using a case study of Uighur nationalism and economic development. What has the impact of the WDP and its plan for Uighur economic development been on Uighur nationalism? This is an important question not only because there is a fairly extensive theoretical literature on this relationship. It is also important to the Uighur case because Beijing has explicitly declared the WDP to be intended to ameliorate Uighur economic development. Therefore, it is useful to analyse whether economic growth can be expected to decrease the Uighurs' support for nationalism. On a theoretical level, I found little support for the theory that economic growth will cause nationalism to decrease, and more evidence suggesting that regardless of Uighurs' level of economic development, they will continue to feel alienated from the Chinese state. Hence their support for nationalism will continue.

My analysis of the situation in Xinjiang identifies three major sources of Uighur nationalism today. The first is that the CCP implemented the WDP so that benefits went to the Han Chinese living in Xinjiang and not to the Uighurs. As a result, Uighur economic growth remains slow, especially relative to that of the Han. This has been a

source of discontent, and hence of support for nationalism. The second is that Beijing has proven itself willing and able to use brute force and repression to maintain or create stability in Xinjiang; this repression exacerbates the nationalist sentiment already in existence. Third, the CCP's strategy of encouraging Han migration to Xinjiang has likely been the source of the most frustration for the Uighurs, as the Uighurs have gradually become outnumbered in Xinjiang. A key element in all three of these sources of Uighur discontent has been Uighurs' strong sense of history and the legacy of Chinese policies in Xinjiang. Beijing's policies and the way events have unfolded in Xinjiang have resulted in ongoing support for the Uighur separatist movement.

This essay will first review the literature on the connection between economic growth and nationalism, providing some context to explain Beijing's position (part 1). The analyses of various Xinjiang observers are examined in order to better assess whether Beijing's strategy is of use. I argue that not only is Beijing's position incorrect, but it has not taken the steps to encourage Uighur economic growth in any case. In fact, the WDP was implemented in Xinjiang in such a way as to exacerbate the difficulties already faced by the Uighurs and to further entrench the strength of Beijing and the Han Chinese. To support my argument, I next address some of the fundamental causes of Uighur separatism (part 2), arguing that Uighurs' collective memory of mistreatment at the hands of the CCP has contributed to their support for the nationalist movement today. The next section is an analysis of the WDP, its background and current manifestation in Xinjiang (part 3), emphasising Beijing's goals for the WDP in Xinjiang. The following section addresses the impact of the WDP on the Uighurs specifically (part 4). I argue that the lack of economic opportunities afforded to the Uighurs by the WDP will be its major

legacy, along with the ongoing repression by Beijing of the Uighur nationalist movement. A section on the implications of this argument (part 5) provides some context for Beijing's policies in Xinjiang and suggests what prospects there may be for the Uighur nationalist movement. Finally, I conclude that Beijing's Western Development Policy has not only failed to provide the means for Uighur economic development, but its implementation has actually exacerbated several of the factors contributing to Uighur discontent and support for the nationalist movement.

# **I NATIONALISM AND ECONOMIC GROWTH**

One of the chief stated aims of the CCP's Western Development Policy is to ameliorate the economic circumstances of the west's ethnic minority groups. In doing so, it is believed that restive groups such as the Uighurs, who have become increasingly resistant to Beijing's rule in Xinjiang, will become more wealthy, hence losing interest in supporting the separatist cause. The Party's goal is supposedly the creation of a well-off halcyon minority population, a group of peaceful Chinese citizens. In this section, I review the literature on a connection between nationalism and economic growth and assess how it might apply to the situation in Xinjiang.

## ***Literature Review***

Historically, theorists of nationalism and ethnicity have by and large subscribed to the idea that there is a relationship between a group's level of development and what is known as 'ethnic nationalism'. Ethnic nationalism is usually contrasted with civic nationalism. A 'civic nationalism' "has a social base in civic institutions and a bourgeoisie" (Kuzio 2002, 22), whereas an ethnic nationalism seeks to build a state around ethnic lines. Traditional theorists have associated the supposedly superior, more 'rational' civic nationalism with Western European states, whereas the more irrational, emotive concept of ethnic nationalism was applied to Eastern states. Hans Kohn developed the original framework on this view, and, as Shulman (2002) explains Kohn's theory,

Kohn argued that in the West, particularly England, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United States, nationalism was primarily political ... Inspired by Enlightenment ideas of liberty and equality, Western nationalism struggled against dynastic rule and equated citizenship with membership in the nation ... In the socially and politically more backward areas and Central and Eastern Europe and Asia, however, nationalism arose in polities that very poorly coincided with cultural or ethnic boundaries ... Nations in the East consolidated around the common heritage of a people and the irrational idea of the *volk* (people), instead of around the notion of citizenship. (555)

Some more recent theorists have supported Kohn's ideas, arguing that there are ethnic/cultural nations and contrasting them with civic/political states (see Shulman 2002, 556). Ethnic nationalism is not only a pejorative term but is considered something that all states strive to move beyond. In this spirit, the nationalism literature for a long time reflected the idea that ethnic nationalism exists in 'primitive' societies, built mainly on relations of kinship and in which there was little contact with outsiders. In order for a state to transcend such a primeval condition, scholars "expected that industrialization, urbanization, and the spread of education would reduce ethnic consciousness" (Jalali and Lipset 1993, 55).

The concept of ethnic consciousness and nationalism has also been applied to minority groups within a larger, civic, state. In this regard, too, observers suggested that as modernisation took place, "assimilation of minorities into a large integrated whole was viewed as the inevitable future" (Jalali and Lipset 1993, 55). Ethnic minorities would become less nationalist as they were incorporated into the larger, civic state, wherein emphasis is on one's citizenship rather than ethnicity or cultural adherence.

There is substantial literature still supportive of the notion that if a minority group has low levels of economic, political, and social development, then it is more likely to rely on ethnic nationalism for mobilisation of its members. In the literature, if low economic indicators are associated with a group's propensity to ethnic nationalism, and perhaps ethnic violence, then economic growth and 'modernisation' would lessen ethnic nationalism and encourage civic nationalism. If this is the case, then pursuing economic growth for peripheral groups is essential to reducing risk of ethnic nationalism and conflict (Law 2005).

In the literature, there is often an implied assumption that economic development is a key factor in the shift from ethnic to civic nationalism (Kuzio 2002). There is extensive treatment of the correlation between low economic indicators and a risk of ethnic violence (see Collier 2000; Easterly 2001; Brown 1996). However, while the literature addresses this idea, I have found very little explicitly arguing that economic growth will deter nationalism – the argument espoused by Beijing.

The opposite argument, that economic growth will have no deterrent effect on nationalism, is briefly considered by Gourevitch (1979). His study suggests that a peripheral, ethnically distinct region which houses neither political nor economic leadership (Xinjiang would be such a case) is unlikely to develop strong nationalism. If that same peripheral region then experiences some economic growth, his contention is that nationalism is likely to increase (306). However, if the peripheral region's economy falters then that, too, may be a cause for nationalism to develop. He also notes that the

stronger the economic potential in the peripheral, ethnically distinct area, whether or not that potential has been developed, the stronger the peripheral nationalism will be (319).

There is little support for the position adopted by Beijing outside the early development literature. In fact, the theory about the relationship between civic consciousness and modernisation or development conforms very little to historical reality. In reality, “the process of modernization itself brought about an increase in ethnic consciousness” (Jalali and Lipset 1993, 65). As Kuzio (2002) observes, modern, supposedly ‘civic’ Western states have experienced ethnic nationalist conflicts in many places, including in the UK, France, Belgium, Canada, and Spain (25). In fact, more contemporary analyses of ethnic mobilisation assume that modernisation has stimulated ethnic movements in recent times: for instance, minority groups may see widespread technology and centralised education and administration as threats to their culture or ethnic background. Given this suggestion, the purported connection between Uighur economic development and a decrease in support for Uighur nationalism should be examined.

### ***Economic Growth and Uighur Nationalism***

The official CCP position is that low economic development encourages ethnic nationalism, whereas ‘modernisation’ will create a civic nationalism. The WDP was in part designed to reflect this idea. Beijing’s position remains that economic development will discourage the Uighur separatist threat. One government report in the mid-1990s noted that “separatist movements gnawing away at Chinese control in ethnic border regions will only be silenced by an increase in material wealth among local populations”



(quoted in Agence France-Presse 1996). With this in mind, copious resources have been spent to convince Uighurs and other minorities that the WDP is intended directly for their benefit.

In the fairly recent history of Uighur nationalism, the separatist movement has been strongest when the Uighurs felt they had some emerging degree of economic, cultural, and perhaps political independence, but in this regard they nevertheless lagged behind other groups living in Xinjiang. It may be possible to explain this using another theory about political rebellion, that of relative deprivation. The theory of relative deprivation refers to a situation in which a group feels that it is lacking something it ought to have – usually something it sees another group possessing (see Walker and Smith 2001). In this sense, the deprivation a group feels may not necessarily be absolute; for example, the group may not be at the absolute bottom of the social, political, or economic ladder, but in comparison with the prosperity of another group they feel deprived. One facet of this theory is temporal relative deprivation. This refers to a case in which a group temporarily experiences an expansion of rights (whether political, economic, and so forth) and those rights are subsequently rescinded or diminished. This may leave the group with rising expectations, but no outlets for those expectations, resulting in political rebellion or violence.

In this context, the development of Uighur nationalism since the inception of the PRC is an example of a case of relative deprivation. At times of extreme repression and lack of rights and opportunities for all the inhabitants of Xinjiang (and China, for that matter), there was little Uighur nationalism movement to speak of. This can partially be

attributed to the fact that during eras such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, ethnic minorities along with most other Chinese were afraid to speak up. Those who expressed themselves often disappeared and were never heard from again, and the rest apparently learned their lesson. Once Xinjiang opened up to the outside world and some economic opportunities appeared, Uighurs' expectations grew. Because the economic growth was lopsided, however, and Uighurs have largely failed to benefit from it, the separatist movement has re-emerged. Uighurs compared themselves with the Han Chinese in Xinjiang and perceived a gap; hence disillusionment spread and demonstrations and nationalist violence became almost commonplace.

In the literature on Uighurs which addresses the economic development and nationalism issue, many sources acknowledge the fact that Uighurs' low level of economic development is a major contributing factor in their drive for secession. But not many reverse the argument to suggest that if the Uighurs were richer, they would be less inclined to desire independence. In the literature, broadly speaking, analyses sympathetic to Beijing tend to agree that stability will improve with economic growth, whereas critics of CCP policy usually argue that economic development will not reduce separatist tensions between the Uighurs and China.

Tian (2004), for example, argues that in response to the worsening security situation along China's western borders, the Chinese government launched the Western Development strategy in order to improve living standards of all inhabitants of those provinces. The eventual outcome of this strategy, assuming its success in improving the economy, will be richer and more stable, less violent, populations (621-622). Lin and

Chen (2004) concur that “the Go West Program will certainly help to reduce economic disparity” and hence solve “political, social, ethical, religious, [and] security problems” (664). Lai suggests that if there is an immediate improvement in minority living standards, “the regime may win their loyalty” (Lai 2002, 462). McCarthy (2002) argues that because “increasing disparities and relative underdevelopment can spark protest, violence, and political unrest”, projects to improve economic development in minority areas are a “conscious effort on the part of [Chinese] officials to equalize the benefits of growth” (110). In addition to economic development, the CCP leadership actively supports the “reestablishment and resurgence of many minority cultural practices and institutions”, which altogether indicate the CCP’s real commitment to improving the lives of ethnic minorities in the PRC. As long as the CCP has the real goal of improving minorities’ lives, then economic growth in combination with the promotion of minority culture will necessarily come about (117).

The opposite argument, that economic development of ethnic minorities may not directly reduce their tendency to support nationalism, is based on the idea that Uighurs’ and others’ problems may be more complex than simply economic grievances. Even if Uighur living standards miraculously improve in the next few years, other problems may emerge. For example, “gains in economic well-being and education may actually heighten [minorities’] sense of ethnic identity” (Lai 2002, 461). Becquelin (2004) demonstrates that in the case of the formerly-Soviet Central Asian states, ethnic identities may seem forgotten as a society struggles with low economic development; but as the society gets richer, ethnic identity can reemerge as a fundamental issue. This may be an apt assessment of the Uighur case as well. Thus, even if the WDP fulfilled its stated

objectives of minority economic development, it may also stimulate the very “ethnic resurgence” it was intended to stifle (Moneyhon 2004, 522). Dreyer’s (2005) skepticism about the link between increasing economic development and diminishing nationalist grievances sums up the case:

Even should the gap between Han and minorities’ standards of living be significantly narrowed, antagonisms are unlikely to disappear. Minority groups that are more prosperous will have more time and money to devote to cultural interests ... Also, many of the minority grievances are not simply material but intimately concerned with issues of self-identity and group aspirations as well. (81)

This paper concurs that Uighur economic growth taken alone will not be sufficient to end Uighur nationalism and the quest for an independent Eastern Turkestan (as it is known to Uighur nationalists). Uighur identity has been prodded by the economic hardships they currently face and would not simply be forgotten should Uighurs suddenly become rich. Furthermore, at this point Uighurs have too much collective memory of misfortune and abuse at the hands of the Hans. This, like spending time and money on cultural regeneration, could actually increase if Uighurs became more prosperous. The reality of the increasing movement of Han Chinese into Xinjiang is enough to provoke most Uighurs into strong sentiments of nationalism (Bovingdon 2002), regardless of their economic standing. There is no reason to suppose this would do anything but be exacerbated even with Uighur economic development.

Moreover, it is unlikely in the near term at least that there will be a chance to see the impact of economic growth on Uighur nationalism, because the Western Development Plan has not boosted the living standards of the Uighurs to the degree confidently expected by Beijing. Uighur living standards have, in fact, improved slightly,

though the depth of this improvement is controversial. The Chinese state media, for instance, announced in 2004 that “regions inhabited by China’s minority ethnic groups experienced an average 10 percent of annual GDP growth since 2000” (Xinhua 30 May 2005), but “regions inhabited by” likely refers to these provinces as a whole, not specifically the minority populations therein. Outside analysts contend, on the other hand, that the bulk of the benefits of Xinjiang’s development are available only to the Han Chinese and Uighurs are specifically excluded (Box 2003, 21; Dillon 2002, 27), thus ensuring their economic stagnation; both Becquelin and Moneyhon note that the economic development indicators for predominantly Han areas are much stronger than those in the southern, predominantly Uighur areas (Becquelin 2000, 68; Moneyhon 2004, 498)<sup>1</sup>.

Regardless of Beijing’s actual commitment to Uighur economic development, most of the projects brought about in the last ten years have either contributed to the increase of Han settlers in Xinjiang or facilitated Hans’ economic and social superiority in the province. The rationale behind the formation of the WDP was to create a substantial improvement in minorities’ living standards; the actual implementation of the WDP has been such that Uighurs are continually economically, socially, culturally, demographically, and linguistically marginalised, thus virtually ensuring continued resistance to Chinese rule and a thriving separatist movement.

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to find any kind of reliable evidence on the statistical differences between Hans and non-Hans in Xinjiang. It is likely that no such statistics have been gathered, and so I must rely on those presented by the Party, and on regional comparisons such as those of Becquelin (2000) and Moneyhon (2004).

## II THE ROOTS OF UIGHUR NATIONALISM

Uighur resistance to China's rule has existed since before the People's Liberation Army annexed Xinjiang to the People's Republic. A variety of factors have encouraged Uighurs to support the nationalist movement, and this includes events that many nationalist Uighurs are too young to have experienced. Uighur nationalists draw on a strong communal sense of historical injustice at the hands of the Chinese, including the CCP's policies on minorities since 1949, in order to mobilise support.

Uighurs' collective memory of two brief periods of independence from China, as well as their sense of having a distinct cultural and historical identity, is one contributing factor to Uighur nationalism today. Before 1949, the group now known as the Uighurs had inhabited the area for several centuries and had been subject to rule by a variety of foreign powers. The nationalism which surfaced amongst this group in the early twentieth century actually brought into use the word 'Uighur' (Millward and Perdue 2004, 47). In 1921, a group of Muslims in the region organised the 'Xinjiang People's Representatives Meeting' in Tashkent, at which they decided to restore the ancient name of 'Uighur' to that group (Wang 2002, 177). Thus, despite nationalist claims to the contrary, the ethnonym of 'Uighur' is a recently reclaimed label<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Uighur nationalists assert that a group calling itself Uighur has lived in that part of the world without interruption or name change for over one thousand years. This belief forms a key part of the nationalist claim to the territory. In fact, the word referred to a Buddhist-turned-Muslim population in the area before the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Millward and Perdue 2004, 47)

In the 1920s and 1930s while Communists and Nationalists jostled for control throughout China, a Uighur nationalist movement was gaining strength. Journals, newsletters, and schools started educating Uighurs with nationalist ideas (Millward 2004, 4). This resulted in several small armed uprisings against Chinese rulers beginning in the 1920s, mostly around Kashgar (the area with the strongest concentration of Uighurs).

Subsequently, Uighur nationalists twice established independent states, in 1931-33 and 1944-1949 (Millward 2004). In 1931, there was an explosive Uighur rebellion in the south of Xinjiang against the then-ruling Guomintang, which culminated in the establishment of the Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkestan, with its capital in the city of Khotan. Another rebellion in 1944 in Ili, in northern Xinjiang, resulted in the creation of the Eastern Turkestan Republic (Rudelson 1997, 28-30). This last independent state dissolved when Soviet support ceased after the Communists won the Chinese civil war. Both the Uighur Republics, although only temporary, represent “milestone[s] of Uyghur nationalist history and a precedent cited by today’s independence advocates” (Millward 2004, 5). They are referred to by Uighur separatists almost as a golden age and used as evidence not only that Uighurs can govern themselves, but that they can throw off Chinese rule to do so<sup>3</sup>.

After Xinjiang became part of the PRC, Uighurs were subject to a series of wildly divergent CCP minority policies. The positive policies had very little impact, and the negative, repressive policies left a lasting impression. The consequences of all of Beijing’s minority policies have mainly been to increase support for the separatist

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<sup>3</sup> Some bank notes from the 1944-49 free republic have been hidden and treasured by Uighur nationalists (see Kurlantzick 2004a, 140), although presumably to have such material found in one’s home would be tantamount to a prison sentence or worse.

movement. Indeed, in the place of many of the inter-tribal disputes that marked the Uighur community before 1949, the unavoidable presence of the CCP since then has enabled Uighurs to unite against a common enemy (see Kurlantzick 2004a). The state's minority policy has served as a focal point for Uighur discontent and, to a certain degree, has fostered separatist and anti-China agitation in Xinjiang.

In the early 1950s, as part of their national unification plan, Mao Zedong and the CCP crafted minority policy based on two ideas, first that "China is a unitary state made up of numerous politically equal ethnic groups ... [and] no minority has any right to secede from China", and second, that "minorities have the right of autonomy, including to practise and develop their own cultures and religions, and use their own languages" (Mackerras 2003a, 21). These early minority policies contained no overt pressure to assimilate minorities into the 'Chinese' fold (Magid 1998). One early provision was a system of regional autonomy, whereby provinces like Xinjiang with large non-Han populations were granted some independence from central decision-making. The province was officially renamed the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in 1955<sup>4</sup>.

In Xinjiang, 'regional autonomy', which is still in practice today, has not meant much more freedom for Uighurs (nor for other minorities). In fact, though it "supposedly gave non-Hans mastery of their regions ... in Xinjiang, the purpose of this system, far from making non-Hans head of their house, has been simply to keep them in the house" (Bovingdon 2004a, 8). Moneyhon (2003) suggests that Beijing's regional autonomy

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<sup>4</sup> There are four other ethnic autonomous provinces in the PRC and dozens of ethnic autonomous prefectures, cities, and towns (see Dreyer 2004).



policy is a palliative to “pacify [minorities] by sustaining their own customs, religion, language, and limited self-government until the immigration of Han Chinese slowly changes the makeup of the population” (514). Critics have noted that the overall effect on Xinjiang of so-called ‘regional autonomy’ has been to restrict the freedoms and opportunities of minority populations. They draw attention to the irony of a system called ‘autonomy’ which appears to be a cover for the assimilation of minorities (see Bovingdon 2004a; Moneyhon 2004; Dreyer 2004). As Becquelin (2004) remarks, “the autonomy of minority areas and the development of ‘national characteristics’ will ultimately result in their assimilation” (372). This inevitably has contributed to Uighurs’ disenchantment with Chinese rule.

While the regional autonomy system has remained in place since its inception, the earlier tolerant philosophy underlying minority policy was dramatically reversed in the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), constructed by Mao as vehicles for China’s modernisation. Both were unmitigated disasters in Xinjiang as elsewhere in the PRC, and have left a legacy of bitterness between most ethnic minorities and the Party. Part of official policy in the Great Leap Forward was the forcible assimilation of ethnic minority groups and cultural homogenisation: “Ethnicity itself became an ‘obstacle to progress’. Party leaders stepped up attacks on Islam and other ‘backward customs’ ” (Bovingdon 2004a, 10).

In the Cultural Revolution, a fanatical emphasis on uniting China meant stepped-up attacks on ethnic minorities. In Xinjiang, “activists frightened [minorities] into shedding their habitual clothes, adornments, scarves, and hats for Mao suits”; mosques

were destroyed, and religious leaders and ordinary Muslims were forced to eat pork and raise pigs (Bovingdon 2004a, 11). Beards were made illegal and shaved off in the streets. Intellectuals, Uighur elites, and religious leaders were routinely arrested and tortured. The use of the Uighur language was forbidden and Uighurs were forced to greet each other with “Long live Chairman Mao” in Chinese. Traditional minority beliefs and customs were attacked or forbidden; throughout China, “mosques, temples, and churches were razed, and monks and nuns were stripped, beaten and tortured” (Magid 1998, 11). Thousands of religious leaders were sent to labour camps for ‘re-education’ (Leung 2005, 900). Jiang Qing, the infamous Madame Mao, aptly summed the era up when she asked, “Why do we need minority nationalities anyway?” (quoted in McCarthy 2002, 112). From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, Uighurs were so ruthlessly treated that resistance was basically impossible. Many who survived those ghastly times felt lucky to have done so. Though policies have changed, many minorities still believe the CCP’s main goal is to assimilate or eliminate all minorities.

Another reason Uighurs have embraced the nationalist movement to the extent they have is in response to one of the key strategies (perhaps the primary strategy) of the CCP in ruling Xinjiang. This strategy has been to encourage the migration of Han Chinese from outside Xinjiang to settle there. This has been a long-term approach in China’s border regions. Mao allegedly got the idea from Stalin, who “advised flooding Tibet and other border regions with Han Chinese. ‘Since ethnic Chinese make up no more than five per cent of Xinjiang’s population, the percentage of ethnic Chinese should be brought to thirty ... In fact, all these border territories should be populated by Chinese...’” (Chang and Halliday 2005, 453). Indeed, since the foundation of the PRC,

an integral part of Beijing's policy towards the remote border provinces has been to fill the areas with Han Chinese. This is the same strategy that a colonising state would use when taking over a hostile region (see Becquelin 2004; Sautman 2000; Gladney 1998).

Since the People's Liberation Army first entered Xinjiang, victorious after the civil war, an influx of Han migrants has been a reality for Uighurs and other ethnic groups in the formerly minority-dominated province. In the early 1950s, some 104 000 soldiers from the PLA retired and were told or chose to settle in Xinjiang. With their families, they became farmers, miners, and security guards. Some worked for the Party. In 1954, these loosely organised groups of former soldiers became the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) (Seymour 2000, 172). The XPCC was known as much for its settlements and construction and infrastructure projects as for its links with the military. It was intended by the central authorities to play a key role in both the economy and security of Xinjiang: the XPCC would "improve the regime's strategic posture by protecting key transportation routes, guarding against internal or external threats and exploiting nearby natural resources without appearing to be 'imposing' upon the local inhabitants" (McMillen 1981, 69). The XPCC served as something of an unofficial stabilising presence along with the CCP and PLA.

The XPCC played a crucial role in what Uighur nationalists see as the "colonisation" of Xinjiang (Seymour 2000, 173). The demobilised soldiers, soon joined by skilled workers, peasants, and educated urban youths, came primarily from eastern China and were ethnically Han. By 1954 the XPCC had over 200 000 members. As such, the use of the XPCC for security and economic affairs in Xinjiang was the first signal

from Beijing that migration from eastern China was to play a key role in its Xinjiang policy. At this point, the CCP felt that “Han immigration to Xinjiang would aid in integrating the region and its non-Han inhabitants into China politically and would also help bring about the conditions necessary for rapid, large-scale economic development and modernisation” (McMillen 1981, 77). This is an example of what commentators call “Han chauvinism” (Sautman 1999) – the idea that Hans can or must help civilise and modernise the poor backwards minorities. The XPCC was the first and perhaps most overt display of this kind of attitude.

After Mao’s death in 1976, minority policy changed emphasis. In the late 1970s Deng Xiaoping introduced affirmative action policies favouring minorities and exemptions for minorities from laws affecting Han Chinese. These policies and exemptions are still a source of controversy in China today. Some believe that they have contributed major benefits to minorities, and that they signify a real willingness on the part of the CCP to concede something to minorities (see McCarthy 2002; Magid 1998; Sautman 1999)<sup>5</sup>. Others argue that minority-specific policies, even if they look benign or beneficial, are at best instruments for the continued subjugation of minorities and at worst tools for minority assimilation and elimination (see Becquelin 2004; Bovingdon 2004a; Gladney 1998). Affirmative action policies are seen by Uighurs, like the regional autonomy system, as a meaningless show at best<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> I have not, however, come across any Uighur sources, nor references to Uighur sources, nor any other ethnic group for that matter, who share this idea.

<sup>6</sup> In addition, many Han object to these policies as unfairly favouring minorities at Han expense (Sautman 1998).

Preferential family, education, and administrative-level policies were instituted in the early 1980s. Ethnic minorities, for example, were exempted from China's famous one-child policy which began in 1980. As of 1983, urban minorities were permitted two children, and rural couples are allowed three or possibly four (Sautman 1998, 89). Another family planning policy permits minorities to marry two years earlier than the minimum age for Han (Sautman 1998, 88). Special scholarships from central and provincial governments, tuition and fee exemptions, and proportional allocation of minority student spots in universities were some of the ways the policies encouraged minority education (Sautman 1998, 91). By 1990, an ethnic minority person from Xinjiang with a high-level education stood a very good chance of obtaining "an elite position" (94). However, it should be noted here that while fairly significant numbers of Uighurs and other minorities have been hired to fill government quotas, they are the least likely to advance; furthermore, the absolute number of minority graduates fulfilling the necessary requirements to get these jobs is proportionally low compared to their Han Chinese counterparts (*Economist* 2004; Moneyhon 2004).

Within the Communist Party, Mao himself had advocated training large numbers of minority cadres as a "solution to the 'nationalities problem'" (Sautman 1998, 94). Whether or not this would have proved a successful strategy is a moot point, as it simply did not happen. Ethnic minority Party members are few and far between in higher levels of government. Indeed, high-ranking party officials, even at the provincial level in minority provinces, usually are Han. This is of course a source of friction with Uighurs, who have to accept directives supposedly for their well-being directly from the oppressing group. For Uighurs as well as for other ethnic minorities, affirmative action

tactics are thus another facet of CCP minority policy which has contributed to Uighur discontent and thus nationalism.

Meanwhile, since Xinjiang's economy began to be liberalised in the 1980s, the arrival of Han has continued, and probably increased (Bachman 2004; Bovingdon 2002)<sup>7</sup>. The same strategy Stalin propounded to Mao more or less still holds: an effective way to deal with restive minority areas is to dilute the minority populations therein. Becquelin (2004) argues that Han migration is Beijing's most reliable and popular policy for dealing with minorities (301). All along, in fact, Chinese authorities have to some degree attempted to entice Hans to Xinjiang using language reminiscent of the settling of the American or Canadian west or of Siberia<sup>8</sup>. Xinjiang and other western provinces are a "land of opportunity", where property, land, and good jobs are for the taking and anyone can get rich. Han Chinese from other, poorer parts of the country have accepted this enticement and have been arriving in Xinjiang by the trainful for decades.

Subjugated by the CCP for decades under Mao, Uighur animosity towards the rulers of Xinjiang had to be kept under wraps or risk the consequences (Bovingdon 2002). When Deng began liberalising the restrictive policies, many Uighurs hoped this could be a turning point that would lead eventually to autonomy or independence (Millward 2004). But the preferential policies were largely ineffective and, for Uighurs, were overshadowed by the unceasing arrival of Han Chinese. Xinjiang began to open up

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<sup>7</sup> These sources have speculated about the increase in Han in-migration; there are simply no reliable statistics available to confirm the numbers of Han migrants.

<sup>8</sup> Tyler's (2003) book *Wild West China* is premised on the idea that a parallel can be drawn between the US treatment of Native Americans and its settlement of the west and how China currently sees Xinjiang: "a place inhabited by barbarians ready for civilizing" (see also Kurlantzick 2004a, 139).

but Uighurs failed to prosper. Grumblings of discontent materialised. With Uighur economic prospects low, the idea of an independent Eastern Turkestan gained strength.

Nationalists began to mobilise once Uighurs were no longer subject to the arbitrary repression, arrests, and imprisonments which had characterised the Mao era. Nationalist protests began as early as 1980-81, when a major riot occurred in Kashgar in which hundreds of people may have been killed (Sautman 2000, 245). In 1985, a Uighur governor in Xinjiang was replaced by a Han, sparking a large demonstration by Uighur students, who marched in the streets of Urumqi and Kashgar shouting slogans like “Hans out of Xinjiang” and “Independence, Freedom, and Sovereignty for Xinjiang” (Bovingdon 2004a, 5). More student-led rioting occurred in 1988 and 1989. At that time, the Uighur case was not unique, but echoed by other student protests throughout the PRC. In May 1989, a book entitled *Sexual Customs* was published in Shanghai. The book, comparing the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca to “homosexual orgies and sodomy with camels”, was the target of Muslim protests from Urumqi to Beijing and many places in between (Hastings 2005, 30; Millward 2004, 8).

After the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989, Party tolerance towards any sort of demonstrations, even if non-violent, disappeared. This only served to exacerbate Uighur hostility to the regime. Protests, violence, organisation of Uighur separatists, and the harshness of the Chinese response all increased in the 1990s. One major contributing factor to this was the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Central Asian republics (Hyer 2006; Gladney 2002, 269; Kurlantzick 2004a, 263). Uighurs watched with envy as their ‘ethnic cousins’ on the border of Xinjiang formed the

independent states of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The formation of these states served as another a focal point for Uighur dissatisfaction with Chinese rule (Gladney 2002, 269). For a time, Uighur separatists nourished a hope that China would splinter like the USSR and they could create a new Eastern Turkestan. The CCP, aware of what was going on, took no chances, and resolutely cracked down on dissent (Kurlantzick 2004a, 136).

According to Abulahat Abdurixit, a Uighur activist in exile, there may have been as many as “a few thousand incidents” of separatist violence in Xinjiang in the 1990s (Moneyhon 2004, 501). Some of the more well-known ones include an uprising near Kashgar in 1990, in which thousands of rebels may have died; a series of riots throughout Xinjiang in early 1996; bus bombings in Beijing in 1996; an uprising at Ili, in northern Xinjiang, in February 1997, with subsequent bombings in Urumqi and Beijing (Gladney 2004b; Kurlantzick 2004a). It is important to note here that Uighur separatists, too, used unjustified violence to make their point. The deaths of both Uighur and Han civilians in these incidents were used by Beijing to prove that Uighur nationalism posed a major threat and had to be stopped.

The Chinese government published a document in 2002 entitled *East Turkistan [sic] Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away With Impunity* (reprinted in *People's Daily*



2002)<sup>9</sup>. The document provides an allegedly complete account of Uighur separatist activities in the 1990s. As with all information coming from the CCP, however, its contents must be viewed with some skepticism; it makes some confusing claims (see Millward 2004, 12). The document enumerates 57 deaths caused by separatists or “terrorists” in Xinjiang, although elsewhere it claims that the “ ‘East Turkistan’ terrorist forces inside and outside Chinese territory were responsible for over 200 terrorist incidents in Xinjiang, resulting in the deaths of 162 people of all ethnic groups, ... and injuries to more than 440 people” (*People’s Daily* 2002, 3). The document follows with a list of these alleged incidents, some of which are verifiable. In fact, the document underlines Uighur support for nationalism; ironically, this support, which results in increased repression by Beijing, only exacerbates Uighur dissatisfaction and in turn reinforces the nationalist movement.

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<sup>9</sup> Beijing began describing Uighur separatist violence as ‘terrorism’ soon after 11 September, 2001. Since that date, global acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of fundamentalist Islamic terrorism, and the US’s determination to stamp it out, allowed Beijing to make public its battles with Uighur separatists in Xinjiang. Suddenly, Uighur separatists were relabelled ‘Muslim terrorists’ and their quest for an independent Eastern Turkestan became a *jihad*. The CCP ignored the fact that the Uighur separatism – before and after 9/11 – had very little to do with Islam and was much more politically than religiously motivated (Human Rights Watch 2005).

### **III WESTERN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT AND CHINESE POLICY IN XINJIANG**

In addition to their sense of historical injustice and the repression at the hands of the Chinese, Uighurs have been struggling economically since Deng Xiaoping became China's leader. In this case, however, they are not alone; Beijing has had to respond to the lagging economic of western China as a whole.

#### ***How the West Fell Behind***

After Mao Zedong's death, CCP leader Deng Xiaoping began the long process of opening China's economy to the outside world. Deng's main goal for the PRC was to create prosperity as rapidly and as widely as possible. The most efficient way to do this was to invest capital where it would multiply most quickly and this was mainly in the coastal cities of the east, which had higher levels of infrastructure and development. The philosophy behind this focus was the hope that "a rising tide of coastal development would eventually lift the boats of the poorer, less developed regions of the interior" (McCarthy 2002, 113). Deng Xiaoping reasoned that, "The coastal areas, which comprise a vast region with a population of 200 million, should accelerate their opening to the outside world, and we should help them develop rapidly first; afterward they can promote the development of the interior" (quoted in Lai 2002, 432). Deng made it clear that, using a strategy of "two overall situations", the coast was first to get support and then, once it had developed to a "comparatively well-off level", the interior areas would receive attention (Holbig 2004, 336).

In the 1980s, the fruits of this strategy – China’s economic ‘miracle’ – unfolded. The eastern provinces grew richer at an exponential rate, but western provinces failed to keep up. Indeed, the gap was actually widening: in 1984, per capita GDP in the eastern provinces was 1.74 times greater than the interior provinces; by 1994, it was 2.24 times greater (McCarthy 2002, 113). By 2004, the average income difference between the coast and the interior was greater than 1:15 (Moneyhon 2004, 496). Between 1978 and 1995, per capita GDP grew 10 percent a year in the eastern provinces, compared to only 7.5 percent in the western regions (Lai 2002, 437).

Not only did the western and southern provinces as a whole have a poorer economic showing than the eastern seaboard provinces, but within those poorer provinces, ethnic minority populations were consistently worse off than their Han counterparts. Thus, in the province of Xinjiang, although the economy did grow in the 1990s, it benefited the Han Chinese population to a much greater degree. In 1998, the overall average rural income was 684 yuan per capita, whereas in the predominantly Uighur southern half of the province it was merely 200 yuan per capita (Becquelin 2000, 69).

The widening gap between east and west was quickly perceived as problematic. Beijing’s newfound emphasis on China’s national unity meant that the CCP had to be preoccupied with the poverty pervasive throughout the western provinces. The wealth disparity was not only an economic issue but linked with concerns about the political stability of China (Tian 2004, 620). Authorities therefore acted fairly quickly to develop a strategy for addressing western development.

## *Developing the West*

By the early 1990s, it was clear that not only had the eastern provinces' explosive growth been the engine for China's newly-dynamic economy, but also that the strategy of basically ignoring the west was having disastrous consequences there. It was estimated that about ninety percent of the 80 million Chinese living below the poverty line were in the western region (Lai 2002, 438; Moneyhon 2004, 496). In the 1990s, politicians from western provinces began complaining about the unfairness of the policies favouring the east, and lobbying the central government to address the growing gap (Tian 2004, 618). Furthermore, politicians from both eastern and western China acknowledged a simultaneous security concern: staggering regional disparities posed a danger to the unity and security of China (Tian 2004, 620). The poor and marginalised populations of the west were beginning to show signs of major dissatisfaction with their circumstances. Most of China's ethnic minorities live in these provinces, so there were additional concerns that this discontent was taking on an ethnic nationalist dimension. It was the explicit position of the Party that economic growth alone would make the strongest contribution to solving these difficulties. Not only would providing economic development lessen the problematic regional disparities, but it was and is believed that an increase in material well-being would discourage the nationalist movements among the ethnic minority groups.

In 1995, Premier Zhu Rongji and President Jiang Zemin agreed to highlight the general concern about the interior during a session of the National People's Congress. As a result, the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996-2000) included explicit plans to "gradually reduce the gap in development between regions" (Lai 2002, 435). However, it was not

until 1999 that a comprehensive strategy intended specifically to address the development of China's far western region was formally launched (Tian 2004, 621). Jiang first used the term *xibu da kaifa*<sup>10</sup>, or 'great western development', in June 1999 and the Western Development Project was born (Lin and Chen 2004, 664).

The 'Go West Program' applies to the municipality of Chongqing<sup>11</sup>, and the provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Shanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Guangxi (Lin and Chen 2004, 665). These provinces cover 71.4 percent of China's land area but hold only 28.1 percent of China's population (Tian 2004, 613).

The five priority areas for western development were identified as infrastructure, environmental protection, economic restructuring, promotion of education and standard of living, and opening of the region (Lai 2002, 451; Tian 2004, 622). The budget for the WDP appeared to be infinite. Under the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005), dozens of projects were laid out in every province slated to receive funding (*Economist* 2000); official government reports noted that China spent over USD \$100 billion on 60 projects under the WDP between 2000 and 2005 (Xinhua 20 May 2005). However, Beijing may have since back-pedalled from its initial grand promises; the cancellation or the paring-down of projects scheduled under the WDP has become commonplace (Moneyhon 2004, 503).

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<sup>10</sup> Tyler (2003) notes that while *kaifa* is usually translated as 'development', in other contexts it is frequently translated as 'exploitation', significantly altering the connotation of 'Western Development' (201).

<sup>11</sup> Chongqing was only designated as a centrally-administered municipality in 1997, despite being one of the largest cities in China with an urban population of at least fifteen million (Tian 2004, 612). Before that it had evidently been languishing in the western hinterlands.

The project was launched with enormous public fanfare, in keeping with CCP doctrine. Politicians, elites, and state media lauded the effort to bring the west out of poverty. Some apparently independent observers also believe the WDP will improve western provinces' economies and peoples in a significant way (see Bedeski 2004; Goodman 2004; Holbig 2004; Lin and Chen 2004; Tian 2004; Yeung 2004). Yeung (2004), for instance, enthuses that "by mid-century, China's west will be economically prosperous, ecologically balanced, ethnically united, socially progressive and culturally advanced. There will be justifiable cause for the centennial celebration of the founding of the PRC" (21). Other analysts have been slower to praise the WDP, or have doubted it altogether. Lai (2002), for instance, suggests that in the short term, the WDP will encounter economic, political, and cultural obstacles "including official corruption, governmental inefficiency, ethnic division, and low economic returns" (432). Others doubt the WDP's alleged economic intentions and suspect it has the more politicised intention of maintaining Beijing's stronghold on the western provinces (Tian 2004; Moneyhon 2004; Becquelin 2004). On the issue of ethnic minorities in the west, there is some concern that the WDP is being used as a pretext for encouraging the movement of Han Chinese into western provinces in order to dilute ethnic populations and hence help political stability (Dreyer 2005; Bovingdon 2004a; Kurlantzick 2004a); and, furthermore, there is widespread agreement among many of these China critics that any economic benefits resulting from the WDP are flowing only to Han Chinese migrants rather than to the west's ethnic minority inhabitants.

## *The WDP and Xinjiang*

Some of the WDP plans specific to Xinjiang include a network of new roads and railways to connect previously remote places; the development of processing and refining industries to complement Xinjiang's wealth of natural resources like coal, oil, and natural gas; and at least one gas pipeline linking Xinjiang and Shanghai (Box 2003, 21). In addition, the following projects were slated for completion: "massive water conservancy projects to 'recover' 50 billion cubic metres of water; the comprehensive restoration of the Tarim River; extensive oil and gas exploitation"; under the Tenth Five-Year plan "an investment of 420 billion yuan (USD \$51 billion) in fixed assets, with 100 billion yuan used to build 70 key projects in the areas of infrastructure, environment and key industries" (Becquelin 2004, 364).

In Xinjiang, while the WDP has helped improve the economy, there are still major problems either not addressed or exacerbated by western development. Xinjiang's economy has expanded since the late 1980s. This is doubtless in part due to the influx of cash and infrastructure development from the WDP, and the projects like those listed above. But separatist violence and Uighur poverty have concurrently increased; the investments of the WDP have benefited Uighurs only to a limited degree. CCP authorities have been careful to frame the WDP as an attempt to alleviate poverty and ameliorate the living standards of minorities while respecting and improving minority autonomy and simultaneously developing Xinjiang's economy. However, the economic development of the west has been emphasised not alongside, but at the expense of, the economic development of minorities, and as a result the nationalist movement has picked up steam. The rhetoric has been framed by the CCP in such a way as to suggest that Xinjiang's

economy and the living standards of the Uighurs will improve hand in hand, but in fact, because Xinjiang's economy, security, and general functioning hinge upon the province's stability, it is necessary to subdue the threats of instability and violence posed by the Uighurs. The CCP certainly views economic development as one way to create stability, but in Xinjiang, they are also relying on violent repression and on the ever-growing population of non-Uighurs to the area.

Officially, the Party recognises a need to “ensure a higher degree of social homogenization, particularly in terms of the civilizing influence of Chinese culture on the non-Han peoples” (Goodman 2004, 326). On this view, the more integrated that Uighurs (or other dissenting minorities, like Tibetans) become into the Han Chinese mainstream, the less likely they are to participate in political violence or consider separation a viable option. If Uighurs are on the whole prosperous, integral parts of Xinjiang's economy, the theory is they will have too much to lose in a battle (violent or otherwise) with the Chinese state. As Moneyhon (2004) observed, Beijing claims to be committed to the idea that “prosperity will breed greater minority cooperation and thereby encourage their integration” into the Han Chinese mainstream (503). For this reason, ethnic minority economic development is officially a key part of the western development strategy (Xinhua 31 May 2005), consistent with the belief that “increasing disparities and relative underdevelopment can spark protest, violence, and political unrest, and it is the state's own interest in security and stability that underpins these projects” (McCarthy 2002, 110). However, despite the WDP's alleged commitment to minority economic growth, the Go West plan has impacted the Uighurs in an entirely different way.



## **IV IMPACT OF THE WDP ON UIGHURS**

The Go West project, as the most recent facet of China's minority policy, has significantly affected the Uighurs, though not precisely in the way envisaged by Beijing. Rather than acting as a means to improve Uighurs' living standards, the WDP has served to further marginalise and alienate them. Especially by comparison with the living standards of Han Chinese in Xinjiang, Uighur living standards have remained quite low. Although there has been some absolute improvement in Uighur economic development, the growing inequality between Hans and Uighurs is worsening. Not only has the WDP failed to create economic growth for Uighurs, resulting in further Uighur disillusionment with Beijing, but the Go West plan is actually fuelling Uighur separatism primarily through the official encouragement of Han migration to Xinjiang. The experience Uighurs and other minorities have had with the WDP has been that provincial growth and development has been the goal at any cost, including disregard for minority rights. Uighurs perceive the WDP as a highly destructive policy which, in their view, threatens their very existence in multiple ways. Beijing's policies in Xinjiang are a proximate cause of Uighurs today joining the separatist movement. Indeed, though Beijing may have had the opposite intention, the development of Xinjiang's economy may be escalating Uighur discontent, separatism, and violence. The Go West project has further economically marginalised Uighurs while actually diluting their presence in Xinjiang.

## *Uighurs and Hans*

The WDP is an all-out drive to modernise and develop the west of China. As such, CCP authorities have used the most efficient means at their disposal to make it happen – just as they did when they first opened eastern China’s economy. These ‘most efficient’ means include the fact that undereducated, underqualified Uighurs are not given good jobs in the new Xinjiang economy, because it is more efficient to give them to Han Chinese. Thus Beijing is encouraging the movement of Han Chinese from elsewhere into Xinjiang. This strategy, in fact, has as much to do with security as it does with economics. Uighurs are facing a flood of Han migration, and on top of that are not receiving economic opportunities.

As part of the WDP, the CCP has encouraged Han migration to Xinjiang with economic and employment incentives. It has been, in fact, an explicit policy of the CCP to send migrants from the east to the west (*Mainichi Daily News* 2000). The call for migrants is usually phrased as an important means for western development: a mid-1990s State Council report suggested,

In order to regulate and push forward the development of the arid and poverty-stricken western region ... we propose the implementation of a plan to attract migration – a new channelling system, designed to establish migrant settlements, to manage and open the desert and build China’s desert agriculture (quoted in Becquelin 2000, 75)

The migrants tend not to come from the rich coastal cities (although some do), but largely hail from impoverished rural areas slightly inland. In some cases, they come from other provinces administered under the WDP, drawn by Xinjiang’s more dynamic economy and the proffered jobs. The sheer number of incoming Hans since the beginning

of the WDP is staggering: for example, the state media reported that in January and February of 2004, some 600 000 Chinese moved to Xinjiang to seek work (East Turkistan Information Center 2004). In addition, this does not take into account the hundreds of thousands of temporary Han labourers who simply stay in Xinjiang.

This particular aspect of the WDP is a very sore point for Uighurs and is probably one of the main, if not the primary, reasons Uighurs are increasingly resisting the Chinese 'occupation'. The job opportunities created by the Go West plan have been offered, not to Uighurs or other minority inhabitants of the province, but to the Han either already there or pouring in daily.

The promise of lucrative jobs is an easy way to lure Hans into Xinjiang. The authorities can obviously determine who gets state-sector jobs, but they also may have some say in the private sector (through mechanisms such as the provision of permits and red tape). Uighurs complain that it is almost impossible for them to get a government job. These jobs pay well and are quite stable. Uighurs, however, often speak little or no Mandarin at all, and this is another way they are excluded from government positions and other high-paying jobs (Chung 2002). This is especially a problem for the older generation of Uighurs, who had no educational opportunity to learn Mandarin. Younger Uighurs in Xinjiang today face a dilemma – some have the choice to be educated entirely in Mandarin rather than in Uighur. This may improve their job opportunities but poses an obvious set of additional problems regarding the maintenance of Uighur culture and language (Box 2003, 22). Even so, competing with Hans is difficult. Han arrivals often have a higher level of education and thus appear to be better qualified for high-paying

jobs. Meanwhile, most Han employed by the state do not speak Uighur so Uighurs are unable to obtain services they need (Yee 2003, 449). Another factor is that the bulk of state investments from the WDP go to urban projects (Hillman 2005), again marginalising Uighurs who have historically tended to concentrate in smaller locales, and favouring the heavily Han-dominated cities.

In effect, the WDP causes something of a vicious circle for Uighurs. State-led modernisation, manifested by Han migration to Xinjiang, actually limits the ability of Uighurs to benefit from economic growth. This obviously exacerbates their poverty, further impeding their capacity to take advantage of economic opportunity.

Xinjiang's economy is now among the most profitable of the western provinces. This can partially be attributed to the help of the WDP, but is also due to its oil reserves and cotton crops. The jobs in these industries go mainly to Hans. In the Taklamakan Desert oil exploration project in 1995, for instance, only 253 of 4 000 workers came from minority groups (Sautman 1998, 97). Considering the importance of these two industries to the Xinjiang economy, the lack of Uighurs benefiting from them is a telling point about how Uighurs are missing out on Xinjiang's economic growth. Uighur nationalists, moreover, cite the impact of these industries throughout China as the primary reason the CCP is determined to keep Xinjiang a part of the PRC<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Uighurs actually see these industries as an additional reason for the feasibility of an independent Eastern Turkestan – local Uighurs are under the impression that Beijing is extracting resources for Beijing's own benefit whereas the region could easily be economically self-sufficient if the profits were going to Uighurs. In demonstrations, Uighurs have been recorded as shouting, "Xinjiang's oil is not China's!" (Dreyer 2005, 74). Unfortunately for the region, however, it is yet unclear how vast Xinjiang's oil reserves actually are, and there is some evidence that they may be much smaller than is hoped (see Moneyhon 2004, 505).

Chinese authorities have made it more difficult for Uighurs to improve their economic well-being in other ways, too. In the complex world of Chinese bureaucracy where a government permit is required to do everything from opening a private business to getting a bank loan to moving to a new part of the province (Tyler 2003, 220), Hans receive these permits much more readily from the CCP in Xinjiang than do Uighurs and other ethnic minorities.

Uighurs see the Hans taking the ‘good’ jobs, but this demographic encroachment is completely changing the face of the region. In the cities of Xinjiang, old (called “backwards”) Uighur neighbourhoods are being razed to build residential and commercial areas for the Han influx. Houses and apartment complexes for Hans are increasingly popping up in formerly Uighur-dominated neighbourhoods, altering the character of the area. These neighbourhoods have shops and services for the Hans, in which of course it is necessary to communicate in Mandarin, as well as restaurants serving Han food (including pork, which is an affront to most Uighurs). Schools in Han neighbourhoods are “informally segregated”; it would be virtually impossible for a Uighur child to be enrolled in one (even if they should want to) (Chung 2002, 12). Giant shopping complexes have appeared, geared towards Han Chinese in products and services, and generally far beyond the financial reach of ordinary Uighurs. There are some hotels in the bigger cities in which there are separate wings or even buildings for Hans and Uighurs – the Han section being the nicer, newer area (Yee 2003, 450). The differences between Han and Uighur neighbourhoods are startling: in Uighur neighbourhoods, the poverty is evident while in Han areas, “businessmen in expensive suits suck down fancy drinks and surf the internet on high-speed lines at luxury hotels”

(Kurlantzick 2004b, 262). Not surprisingly, the segregation of neighbourhoods foments Uighur dissatisfaction, especially as Uighur neighbourhoods are increasingly ghettoised and impoverished.

Xinjiang is geographically divided between its southern and northern portions, separated by the daunting Taklamakan desert. The southern part has always been primarily Uighur, whereas the north has historically had a more mixed population with Hans, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Mongolians, and Russians. In the early years of the People's Republic, incoming Hans settled exclusively in the northern part. Indeed, the capital city of Urumqi (located in the north) is today an almost entirely Han city. Since the 1990s, even southern oasis cities like Kashgar and Khotan have much higher proportions of Han. Of course, the change is noticeable and highly problematic for Uighurs. Some nationalists have called it 'ethnic swamping' or 'demographic genocide'. Regular Uighurs are fully aware of what is happening: a young labourer in Urumqi, for example, told *The Economist*, "I am a strong man and well-educated. But [Han] Chinese firms won't give me a job. Yet go down to the railway station and you can see all the [Han] Chinese who've just arrived. They'll get jobs. It's a policy, to swamp us" (*Economist* 2000).

In 1949, Uighurs constituted more than 80 percent of Xinjiang's population. In the 2000 census, due primarily to the influx of Han Chinese, Uighurs numbered less than 50 percent (Kurlantzick 2004a, 140). In fact, the 2000 census found Xinjiang to be 45 percent Uighur (with a population of 8.3 million), 41 percent Han (7.5 million people), with the remaining 14 percent Kazakh, Hui, and other smaller minorities (All China Data Center 2006). The population of Xinjiang today is nearing twenty million, and at this

point there are probably almost equal numbers of Hans and Uighurs<sup>13</sup>. This is an astonishing turnaround from the demographic dominance once held by the Uighurs and one that is enormously troubling for those concerned with the future of the autonomous region. It is easy to comprehend the Uighur concern with the idea of being out-populated to the point of disappearance. The fact that the CCP authorities are the architects of this shift has been a major contributor to Uighur anger at China. Bringing Hans to Xinjiang is an integral part of the Go West plan, and has certainly contributed to the development of Xinjiang's economy, at the expense of Uighur economic development.

Meanwhile, as Uighur separatist agitation continued, Beijing launched a counteroffensive to Uighur separatism in Xinjiang in the 1990s. This crackdown, known as the "Strike Hard, Severe Repression" campaign and launched in 1997, called for a "great wall of steel" to be built against Uighur separatists (Gladney 2004b, 375). It is important to the context of the WDP to note that, while Strike Hard began as an independent policy, it was eventually integrated into the WDP itself. Throughout the crackdown, there was a particular connection made by authorities between separatist and religious activities. This despite the fact that the separatist movement has never been particularly religious in character. Religious schools and some mosques were closed, some religious study materials were banned, and individuals perceived to be dissenters were arrested and oftentimes executed (Dillon 2002, 27). A zero-tolerance policy towards any dissenting or separatist activity remains in place in Xinjiang today.

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<sup>13</sup> One 2006 source tallies the Han population of Xinjiang to be roughly 12 million, "an absolute majority in the province" (Taynen 2006, 58).

## V IMPLICATIONS

A definitive contributing factor to Uighur separatism, as discussed above, is the in-migration of Han Chinese to Xinjiang. The CCP has explicitly encouraged Han Chinese to move west and settle. But for China's massive population, which is densely concentrated in the east, is it perhaps logical to encourage migration to a less dense area of settlement? Or does Beijing have more sinister motives? Penetrating the 'real' purposes of Beijing's policies are beyond the purview of this essay; but all the evidence points to the idea that the movement of Hans is an example of "internal colonialism", a deliberate attempt at what Uighur activists and China critics call ethnic swamping or demographic genocide (see Sautman 2000; Gladney 1998; Becquelin 2004). Most significantly, Xinjiang is not the first case in China wherein the migration of Han Chinese to an ethnically unstable region has been encouraged.

The CCP faces restive ethnic minorities in more other parts of China. Indeed, the current situation in Tibet, much more well-known on an international scale than the Uighur case, has many parallels with Xinjiang (see Goldstein 2004; Sautman 2005). Both are regions which have not historically been readily identified as part of China; both had majority populations that differed in religion, language, and ethnicity from China proper; both were annexed by the PLA in 1949; and both have experienced violent uprisings and harsh CCP repression since then. Both were poor until the 1980s, but thanks to its abundant natural resources, Xinjiang's economy is now much stronger than Tibet's. Both have been targeted as key recipients of the Open Up the West project. And, finally, both



are experiencing a massive influx of Han settlers who have further economically marginalised the formerly dominant minority group. The Go West strategy, in fact, has played out very similarly in Tibet as in Xinjiang, with the difference that Tibetans are actually poorer, less educated, and have fewer job opportunities than do the Uighurs (see also Hillman 2005).

The latest facet of the WDP in Tibet has been the opening of a railway line between Xining, in Qinghai province, and Lhasa, the capital of Tibet (BBC News 2006). This railway line, which crosses thousands of kilometres of frozen tundra, effectively links Tibet and Beijing by rail for the first time, sparking new fears that trains running the line will serve only to bring more Han settlers to Tibet and dilute the Tibetan population, as well as wreak havoc on the fragile Tibetan environment.

The CCP has already had success in quelling ethnic unrest elsewhere. Inner Mongolia, another ethnic minority autonomous region, is an example where the immigration of Hans had a very desirable effect for Beijing. The population in 1947 was largely ethnically Mongolian, with only 14 percent Han Chinese inhabitants. There were ethnic protests, violence, and repression in the early years of Inner Mongolia's membership in the People's Republic, although Chinese authorities have been encouraging the migration of Han from neighbouring provinces since before 1949. By 1990, the population had reversed the earlier statistic and Mongolians made up only 14 percent of the province's population<sup>14</sup> (Inner Mongolian People's Party 1999; Gladney 2004a, 112). Needless to say, with less than 14 percent of the population, the CCP no

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<sup>14</sup> Today there are fewer than four million ethnic Mongolians out of a population of some 24 million people (All China Data Center 2006).

longer encounters any significant Mongolian nationalism or irredentism in Inner Mongolia. Indeed, there are fears that Mongolian culture and language are disappearing from that province, and the only reason they still exist is because of the Republic of Mongolia to the north<sup>15</sup>.

Uighur and Tibetan activists recognise that fates similar to Inner Mongolia's could easily befall both Xinjiang and Tibet. While the thinning out of Mongolians has proved advantageous to Beijing's quest for security in its border regions, it does not necessarily follow that the Chinese government is purposely pursuing a strategy of out-populating restive minority areas (Starr 2004). Settling Han Chinese in these areas can be seen as part of the strategy for economic growth. In the end, however, there is indisputably a relationship between 'ethnic swamping' and economic marginalisation of minorities. Whether or not we credit Beijing with intentionality, the fact remains that Uighurs face the major challenge of competing for opportunities in an increasingly foreign environment.

Paradoxically, the Han swamping may cause both an increase and a decrease in Uighur separatism. Since the Han influx shows no signs of abating, and indeed since it is an integral part of the CCP's Xinjiang strategy, it will only intensify Uighur discontent. As Hans pour into Xinjiang (see *Mainichi Daily News* 2000), Uighurs will continue to lose job and economic opportunities to this very visible threat, and will remain united against it.

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<sup>15</sup> There are nevertheless still active pro-independence and pro-autonomy nationalist Mongolian groups in Inner Mongolia (see Bulag 2004). Protests and unrest occur occasionally, although on a much smaller scale than in Tibet and Xinjiang. Demonstrations especially around 1989, but also throughout the 1990s, were not usually violent although they often met with violent reactions from the Chinese authorities (Dreyer 2005, 72).

However, there are two reasons to think that the Uighur nationalist movement may suffer some setbacks in the years to come. The first and most important is the demographics of Xinjiang. Even if all Han in-migration ceased tomorrow, the damage has already been done. A formerly dominant ethnic group has been physically pushed out of the centres of industry and economic growth and are now very nearly outnumbered by an oppressing force. Uighur nationalist leaders will find it harder and harder to organise and mobilise an ever-more geographically scattered population. While they will likely remain disillusioned, Uighurs may find it harder to join the cause as the population literally thins out. Second, there is no reason to suppose that Beijing plans to ease its no-tolerance policy for Uighur 'splitism'. Xinjiang has been labelled the "death penalty capital of the world" (Amnesty International 2004). Everyday threats, harassment, and violence are likely to continue, keeping it difficult to operate an organised resistance movement.

There is also a chance that further alienation – economic, social, religious, or otherwise – risks pushing Uighurs towards more desperate measures. One such outcome can already be seen in Xinjiang: Uighurs who, all other options apparently exhausted, are turning to heroin (in plentiful supply over the border from Afghanistan) as an antidote to their hopelessness. The concomitant HIV/AIDS infection rates are skyrocketing in Xinjiang, to the dismay of everyone, including Uighur leaders who fear this turn of events could further impoverish Uighurs. On the whole, however, it seems most likely that thanks to Beijing's policies the Uighurs, like the Mongolians in Inner Mongolia, run the very real risk of fading quietly into a predominantly Han province of Xinjiang.

## CONCLUSION

The WDP was presented by the Communist Party as a major step in the regeneration of China's impoverished west. The creation of jobs and infrastructure, the provision of funds, and the aid in opening western provinces' economies to the rest of China and the world, were to be the contributions that allowed the PRC to prosper as a whole and remain united.

The question of unity and stability was rarely far from the rhetoric used by Chinese leaders when addressing the issue of western development. Because the western provinces are home to most of the PRC's ethnic minority groups, economic development was genuinely seen as a key way to bring poor minorities more securely into the Chinese fold. However, this paper has argued that the impact of the WDP and its supposed plan for Uighur economic development has been exactly the opposite of what the CCP intended: in effect, the WDP has caused Uighur nationalism to increase.

First, the CCP did not use the WDP to attempt to improve Uighur living standards. Instead, Beijing poured money into Xinjiang, Tibet, and so on, but allowed the benefits to flow almost exclusively to Han Chinese therein rather than to the ethnic minorities. This alone is causing increased discontent amongst the Uighurs, as they continuously face barriers to their own development. Second, folded into its Go West project is Beijing's willingness to use whatever force is necessary to subdue threats to the stability of Xinjiang; this repression exacerbates Uighur anger with Beijing and

encourages support for the nationalist movement. Third, the CCP is pursuing a more subtle but effective and likely destructive strategy in restive western provinces: the gradual out-population of Uighurs, Tibetans, and other minorities through the constant arrival of Han Chinese settlers from the east. This is probably the major contributing factor to the growth of Uighur nationalism today, though it is important to remember, too, that Uighurs' sense of historical injustice has also played a motivating role in the separatist movement.

This essay has analysed Beijing's claim that if Uighurs and other ethnic minorities are helped out of poverty, then such groups will be more supportive of the Chinese state and less inclined to pursue nationalist objectives. My assessment of the theoretical literature on this topic suggests that the alleged connection between a group's economic growth and propensity to nationalism is fallacious. There is not enough evidence that a gain in Uighurs' material wealth would lessen their desire for autonomy or independence. Indeed, there are suggestions that such an increase in wealth might encourage and enable the nationalist cause. Moreover, the current state of affairs in Xinjiang makes it appear unlikely that Uighurs are likely to experience much economic growth in any case.

I have argued that whereas Beijing has presented as one of the main goals of the WDP to improve Uighurs' economic development, in reality the policies of the WDP have done more to alienate and marginalise Uighurs in Xinjiang. I have not speculated on Beijing's intentionality in this regard; nor could I do so without more detailed (and reliable) information. It is clear, however, that the CCP is relying primarily on other means such as repression and outpopulation of Uighurs to achieve the goals of stability

and growth in Xinjiang, and it is equally clear that these practices are not having their intended effect: Uighur nationalism has not abated. To avoid an extreme outcome in Xinjiang – either a degeneration into violence or a gradually muted fate like Inner Mongolia – it will be necessary for Beijing to provide real opportunities, not the pretences of the Western Development Project, for Uighurs to participate openly and prosper in Xinjiang's society and economy.

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