Frontiers and Boundaries: Encounters on China's Margins

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2012

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISSN 0571-320X
ISBN 978-3-447-06785-0

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The "Gateway to the Western Regions"[1]
State – Society Relations and Differentiating Uighur Marginality in China's Northwest

Ildikó Bellér-Hann

Introduction

The geographical focus of this paper is the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) situated in the far northwest of the People's Republic of China, a region which in recent years has become increasingly viewed by Beijing as a major threat to China's internal stability.[2]

Scholarly discussions of the region and, by extension, of the Uighurs, over the last twenty years have been frequently situated in a discourse which emphasises the position of Xinjiang as a borderland, crossroads, buffer zone or frontier.[3] While apparently closely connected, such perspectives highlight diverse understandings of the region, some foregrounding its physical location, others its geopolitical significance or cultural affinities. Moreover, these perspectives also have different temporal implications. Emphasis on the borderland nature of Xinjiang simultaneously refers to its position as part of the Qing Empire and, more recently, as an autonomous region of the People's Republic as well as to its geographical marginality within these respective polities. Stressing the spatial distance separating it from the centre has far-reaching implications for the relationship of the centralising state to the local populations.

The crossroads representation of the region conjures up somewhat romanticised images of the Silk Roads which facilitated travel and the exchange of goods and ideas across large distances between East and West, but also its "melting pot" character which, over the course of the centuries, has successfully accommodated a number of different groups, languages, religions and sedentary as well as nomadic pastoralist lifestyles; the time frame implied by the Silk Roads stretches from prehistory to at least the firm incorporation of the region into the Chinese polity in the mid-eighteenth century.

Xinjiang as buffer stresses its separating as well as mediating position between large empires, and it refers primarily to the Great Game in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the ensuing chaotic decades during which parts of the region experienced

1 This is how the oasis of Qumul (Chinese: Hami) was referred to under the Ming dynasty, see Rossabi 1997. I would like to acknowledge the support of the Stein-Arnold Fund of the British Academy which made my trip to Xinjiang in 2009 possible. I also thank Chris Hann, Laura Newby, Zsombor Rajkai and Henryk Szadziewski for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this chapter, and Guenever Bjerre Thaarup for preparing the map.
2 See Mackerras 2003, 2009.
3 See Bellér-Hann et al. (ed.) 2007, Dillon 2004, Millward 2007, Starr 2004 and Tyler 2004.

warlord rule, increasing Russian and later Soviet influence as well as short periods of independence declared by its indigenous Muslim populations.

Its conceptualisation as a frontier zone emphasises the in-betweenness of both the region and its indigenous inhabitants, the Uighurs. It binds Xinjiang and the Uighurs to the Chinese polity, within which they stand out through their cultural, linguistic and religious otherness, while at the same time separating them from their Turkic speaking co-religionists of Central Asia, with whom they show a great deal of cultural affinity. Temporally this in-betweenness emerges with the Qing conquest and stretches to the present day, also encompassing the socialist era.[4]

Given that all these concepts are loaded with a multiplicity of meanings, they are better understood as metaphors connected through their persistent reference to conceptual boundaries which are drawn, maintained, perpetuated, questioned, challenged and transgressed by different actors and interest groups at different historical junctures. These boundaries are hardly ever intrinsically physical, although at times they may assume tangible, material manifestations; for example, in the form of international borders or administrative boundaries or of marking ethnic difference between the Han and the Uighurs.

Dominant scholarly paradigms of contemporary studies on Xinjiang are governed by the realities created through the combined effects of these external (e.g. international borders) and internal lines (e.g. ethnicity). Encircled by international borders and bound to the Chinese polity, the situation in Xinjiang today is primarily conceived as a conflict between an authoritarian Chinese state and an inimical Uighur society. Such a perspective, however, implicitly reifies both the "state" as well as the ethnic groups involved. In spite of efforts to avoid such reification, an exclusive focus on this conflict results in an inadvertent acceptance and perpetuation of the state's classification of its population (*minzu*) without probing into the complexities camouflaged by these categories.[5]

I do not wish to shift the focus altogether away from the ethnic tension. On the contrary, I believe that the focus should be kept, but it needs more refinement and elaboration in a way that does justice to the many complexities involved. For example, while concerns over the increasingly obvious efforts of the Chinese state not only to "tame" and control, but also to assimilate the Uighurs, are often voiced, little attention has been paid to rural policies, even though a large proportion of the Uighur population (65%) live and work in rural areas.[6]

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4 See Bellér-Hann et al. (ed.) 2007.

5 Some authors try to get away from this simple binary opposition, for example Dautcher (2009), Smith Finley (2007) and Hopper & Webber (2009). But to date many Western studies tend to focus on the Uighur representing the exotic other in structural opposition to the "unmarked" Han, whose ethnographic appeal in the Xinjiang context is much reduced by their modernity.

6 Cf. Toops 2004. For example, Frederick Starr's edited volume on Xinjiang, the only handbook on the region to date, includes no article focusing explicitly on the countryside (Starr 2004). Further topics which need urgent attention include the presence of other ethnic groups, recognised or unrecognised as a *minzu* in Xinjiang; the internal heterogeneity of the Han, many of whom have no other place to call "home" but Xinjiang; and the complexities that Uighurs are entangled in, be it social hierarchies, urban or rural residence or regional diversity.

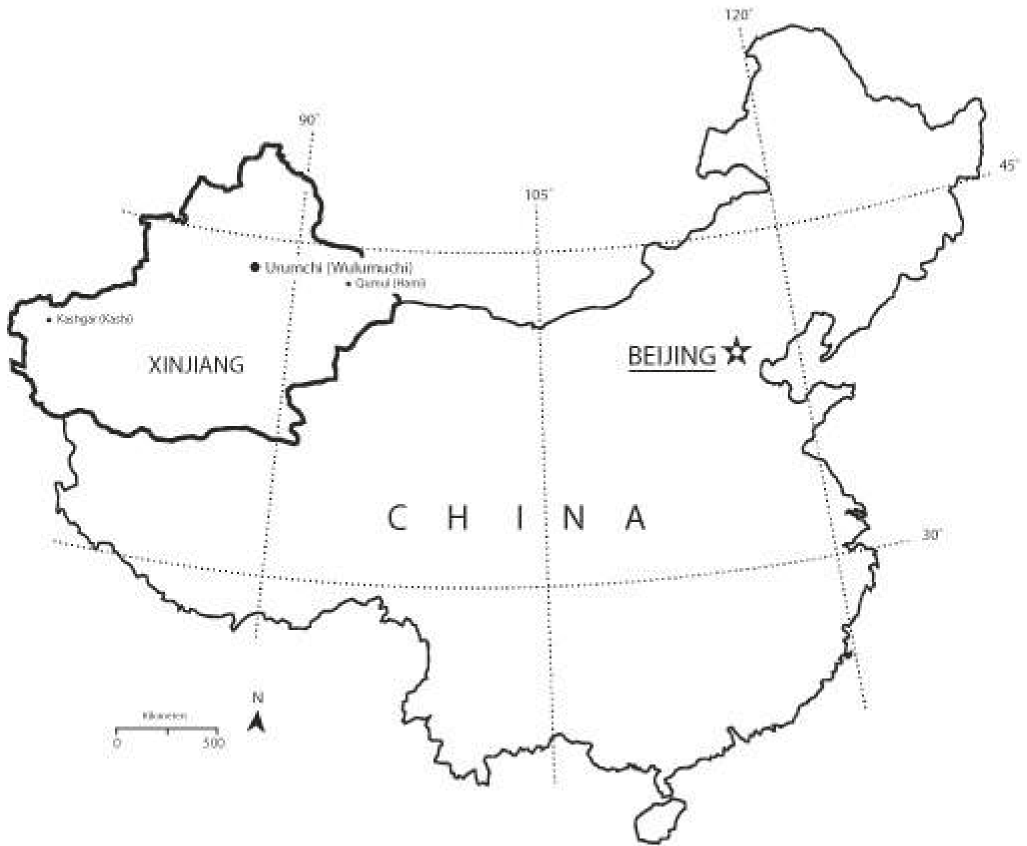

Illustration: The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, with the oasis centres of Kashgar and Qumul highlighted.
Source: Gert-Rolland Müller, http://www.lib.utexas.edu

While such internal divisions within Xinjiang are numerous, this chapter focuses only on one of these: the regional differences separating the Uighur of Eastern and Southern Xinjiang. The first part of the paper probes into the ethnicised state-society dichotomy and argues that more attention needs to be paid to regional differences. This is followed by a summary of my own research findings among rural Uighurs in two regions of Xinjiang, in the South (Kashgar) and in the East (Qumul), pointing to significant differences in state policies throughout the collectivised and the reform period.[7] The third part gives an overview of historical developments under the Qing Dynasty in Eastern Xinjiang, and

7 Fieldwork was conducted in Southern Xinjiang (Kashgar) in the 1990s, and in Eastern Xinjiang (Qumul) in 2006–7, 2009, jointly with Chris Hann. Empirical data were mostly collected in rural Uighur communities, but, given the complex interconnectedness of rural and urban spaces, reference is also made to informal interviews made in the urban setting and with Uighur intellectuals.

suggests at least a partial explanation for these policy differences, connecting regional identities to history.[8]

Chinese state versus Uighur society

Scholarly publications since the early 1990s by historians, political scientists, economists, anthropologists and regional specialists have focused on ethnic relations, top-down economic development and the development-security nexus as well as their legal implications. Such publications thus implicitly or explicitly reinforce the idea of an unequal relationship between a strong, authoritative Chinese state and the Uighur, the Turkic speaking Muslims who have constituted the titular ethnic group of the XUAR since its establishment in 1955.[9] This binary opposition has not changed following the violence which erupted on July 5th 2009 in the regional capital, Urumchi. While such abstract models of opposing, bounded entities, arguably the products of Western academic categorisation, have been recognised and challenged,[10] it is not my aim here to question the validity of the state – society dichotomy in the context of Xinjiang. No doubt, research into both the construction and the de-construction of such boundaries can provide useful insights into the nature and workings of the state. However, the political atmosphere in Xinjiang today does not favour the type of enquiry needed for such conceptual deconstruction, since it would require research into the role and position of the minority elite as well as the workings of state institutions at all levels, including the local one. Let it suffice to say that increasingly heavy-handed state policies introduced in the XUAR, and local responses to these, have inevitably led to the reproduction and hardening of this binary opposition, both in official and local discourse and, somewhat ironically, invite further scholarly enquiry into boundary drawing and boundary maintenance between the ethnicised entities of state and society.[11]

Nevertheless, such an enquiry cannot stop here; if, due to political constraints it is difficult to deconstruct the conceptual category of the state, it is still possible to scrutinise the concept of society, which, like the state, is also subject to multiple and intersecting divisions of sub-region/locality, professional specialisation, and social class, to name only a few of the categories which are becoming increasingly entangled with ethnic distinctions.[12] For this purpose I suggest that the notion of society should be conceptualised not as a totalising system, but, as Somer suggests, in terms of contested, shifting but patterned relations among people, institutions and narratives. This allows us to see and compare

8 It needs to be emphasised that this chapter is no attempt to render an “objective” history of Eastern Xinjiang or the oasis of Qumul: it is concerned with history insofar as it is mobilised in local discourse to make sense of the present (Giordano 2005).

9 For example see Bovingdon 2010, Clarke 2011, Dwyer 2005, Millward 1998, Potter 2011, Rudelson 1997, Smith 2002 and Yee 2003. For discussions on how recognising and labeling minority nationalities and subsequent state policies have contributed to creating ethnic consciousness, see Gladney 1991, 2004.

10 See Nugent 2004 and Hansen & Stepputat 2001, pp. 22–8.

11 On the events in July 2009 see Millward 2009.

12 Present conditions do not favour carrying out a systematic study of local elites and institutions which would allow us to disaggregate the concept of the state. But it is still possible, although increasingly more difficult, to carry out ethnographic research using participant observation and informal interviews without a formal research permit in major urban centres.

different regions of a nation state or any larger polity not as “variants of a single society but as different relational settings that can be compared”.[13]

In what follows I shall attempt to probe into the assumed homogeneity of the Uighurs implicit in many scholarly accounts, and highlight differentiation among them along regional lines. In this I follow Justin Rudelson, who has convincingly demonstrated the importance of oasis identities among the Uighurs in Xinjiang and the historical relevance of the macro-regional orientation of each oasis which defies contemporary political borders.[14] However, I wish to go further than Rudelson. Using the example of the eastern oasis of Qumul, I will show that the internal regionalism characterising Xinjiang manifests itself not just in competing loyalties emerging from the grassroots, but also in regionally differentiated state policies. It will be shown how ethnicity is coloured by local sentiments and gets inextricably entangled both with the larger state project as well as with local history.

Regional differences in peasant politics

The fact that market reforms and the open door policy of China, as well as the “Develop the West” campaign launched in 2000 in Xinjiang have not been accompanied either by a gradual withdrawal of the state or by more pluralistic and democratic trends is somewhat paradoxical but undisputed.[15] It has become axiomatic that the economic development experienced by the XUAR over the last decade goes hand in hand with increasingly repressive religious and cultural policies.

Economically, the XUAR as a whole is doing much better today than ever before, thanks to investments made into the region in the wake of the “Develop the West” campaign. Development has been stepped up and it has undoubtedly brought important changes. Nevertheless, it has failed to solve the questions surrounding Xinjiang, such as ethnic tensions arising from unequal access to resources, Uighurs’ demands for meaningful autonomy, and human rights issues; if anything, it has exacerbated them. In a recent paper, Cao has pointed out that, while Xinjiang in 2000 ranked thirteenth in GDP per capita and seventeenth in urbanisation among China’s thirty-one provinces, it ranked fourth in rural-urban income gap. Cao then goes on to substantiate the claim that the alarming level of rural-urban disparity is closely connected to the spatial distribution of ethnic groups in the XUAR, pointing out that Xinjiang has two urban systems: Han municipalities developed in the north under the Qing and in the course of the twentieth century, and the old Silk Road cities of the South; of these, the former have received far more investment than the latter.[16] While Cao makes an explicit connection between differentiated state policies and history, he does not elaborate any further on this.

My own observations in the course of fieldwork in Eastern and Southern Xinjiang suggest that state policies distinguish and discriminate between regions not just in terms of

13 Somers 1994, p. 627.

14 Rudelson 1997. In this he may have been inspired by Forbes (1986) who first came up with the idea, but Rudelson took it further and refined it. I thank Laura Newby for drawing my attention to this.

15 Much has been published on the “Develop the West”, see for example Becquelin 2004, Holbig 2004 and Moneyhon 2003.

16 Cao 2010.

investment and development, but in other ways as well, subjecting rural Uighurs to differentiated policy directives. Due to the lack of transparency in the workings and decision making processes of local governments, it remains open to speculation which considerations explain differences in policies between Southern and Eastern Xinjiang directly, but at least a partial answer is likely to be found in demography and historical experience. Fieldwork data suggest that such policy differences between the two regions were already discernible in the collectivised period, but have become markedly different following the introduction of the reforms in the 1980s.

The Maoist era

Rural policy implementation followed by and large the same model all over the country, which shows to what extent Xinjiang became integrated into socialist China.[17] My enquiries concerning experiences in the collectivised period evoked in some respects similar responses among Kashgar peasants to those I found among rural Uighurs in Qumul. Accounts emphasised the lack or inadequacy of childcare facilities, the communal canteen system during the Great Leap Forward (1958–62), the meagre food rations, the absence of private property and general poverty, which inevitably restricted hospitality and resulted in the drastic simplification of all life cycle rituals, while religious rituals in this era were either banned and abandoned, or simplified and reduced to clandestine events. However, a few differences between the narratives in the two regions were conspicuous: farmers in Kashgar complained bitterly about their forced involvement in the backyard steel production, about the closing of the markets for extended periods of time, which forced them to resort to the black market, and especially about women's large scale mobilisation to perform men's work (such as constructing roads and digging irrigation canals). Many women in rural Kashgar reported that, in the absence of carts and draught animals, they had to carry heavy loads as if they were beasts of burden, while no such reports were heard in Qumul.[18] Another recurring theme in the Kashgar narratives was the persecution of individuals for political reasons through public humiliation, which involved exercising self-criticism, and being paraded wearing a dunce's cap (*qalpaq*). My interview partners in Kashgar frequently mentioned small, everyday acts of resistance, such as defying the ban on production for private gain, and secretly engaging in crafts production and black market activities. Some of these elements were absent from the narratives collected in Qumul, which suggests that the large scale mobilisation of women for industrial projects and backyard steel production may not have been implemented in the eastern Tianshan mountains. According to the people from Qumul, in contrast to Kashgar, the markets here were at no time closed down entirely. Some people mentioned the public humiliation of members of "wrong class" families, but references to such events were less dominant in Qumul than in Kashgar, the typical explanation being that the few well-to-do individuals had a reputation of treating their servants and subordinates well and therefore escaped punishment. While this *topos* was also present in the Kashgar narratives, such accounts

17 This era in Xinjiang is still under-researched, and there is scattered evidence for a great deal of local variation.

18 On Uighur peasants' situation in the South see Bellér-Hann 1997; on women's position in the Kashgar oasis see Bellér-Hann 1998.

were balanced out by many specific references to the persecution of rich landlords and other "bad class elements". These recollections suggest that the implementation of certain policy directives may have been quite different in the two sub-regions.[19]

While these details generally indicate that policies in the South were perhaps more heavy-handed, there is evidence that the humiliation and sufferings to which the Uighur of Qumul were subjected must have been nevertheless considerable. This is suggested by narratives about the destructive activities of the Red Guards, sometimes identified here as local, Uighur youth; some were schoolchildren beating up their teachers; others participated in the demolition of old historical monuments because of their association with the feudal past or with religion. One old man, the self-appointed guardian of an isolated saintly shrine located in the eastern Tianshan Mountains, explained how in the late 1960s the shrine was destroyed by some zealous local Red Guards. However, within a few years all six of them met their fate; some were struck by debilitating illness and others by premature death, brought about by the wrath of the angry saint.

Another striking revelation which complicates the picture was that in some of the mountain villages in the oasis of Qumul, large numbers of men had been sent to labour camps for years in retaliation for their participation in an anti-Han uprising in 1958. Unsurprisingly, such remarks were not woven into narratives but were made in whispers and only in passing, indicating that this period of history has not been adequately processed yet, due to current restrictions on freedom of speech.[20]

Some of the differences between the narratives from Kashgar and from Qumul may be accounted for by differences in emphasis in locally dominant narrative traditions and in individual preferences for foregrounding and backgrounding particular events. Other differences may be explained by diverging local conditions: for example, in the vicinity of Kashgar, various crafts had flourished and a ban on private production could indeed force many craftsmen to moonlight and to trade on the black market. In Qumul, there has been no established tradition of crafts specialisations comparable to rural Kashgar, and the people of Qumul typically describe themselves as lacking commercial aptitude. The absence of such a ban from the narratives therefore seems to be historically grounded. The frequent references to the use of the dunce's hat (*qalpaq*) as a means of public humiliation in Kashgar and its absence in Qumul could be explained away by the greater social stratification attributed to the Southern parts of Xinjiang when compared to the East. However, it is harder to explain the apparent absence of the large scale mobilisation of women for public work in Qumul or of the closing down of the markets, which contrast sharply with the reported situation in Kashgar at the time. The use of Uighur women as beasts of burden in Southern Xinjiang may have also been an orchestrated attempt to humiliate the local population.

In the reform period

When examining Uighur farmers' conditions in the reform era, especially from the 1980s onwards, the regional imbalance implied by the accounts of the Maoist period assumes more definite contours. During this period new policies were introduced which had far

19 This can be explored through further, comparative research into the micro-history of the Maoist era.

20 While sufferings under collectivisation are freely related, local expressions of anti-Han sentiments remain a highly sensitive topic, clearly because of their potential for becoming actualised.

reaching consequences everywhere in China. Property relations were drastically restructured through de-collectivisation and the second land reform, which granted farmers the right to long term use, if not full ownership, of land. Land accessible to most Uighur peasants in Xinjiang is small and producers' priority is to satisfy the family's subsistence needs through wheat production. Producing for the market is secondary to the meeting of basic subsistence needs, a situation which is comparable to many other parts of rural China.

Empirical data from Southern Xinjiang collected in the mid-1990s and more recently (2006–7, 2009) from Qumul suggest that the implementation of the reforms followed everywhere the same egalitarian principles which granted small pieces of land to each family member. There exists, however, some evidence that the ensuing rural policies in the two regions have followed diverging patterns. In an earlier article, I gave a detailed account of repressive rural politics in Southern Xinjiang, which in the 1990s included:

① residence categorisation, which ties peasants to their birthplace and prevents geographical and social mobility;
② obligatory grain procurement, which requires peasants to sell a certain percentage of their grain to the state at fixed prices;
③ cotton obligation (obligation to grow cotton on a certain percentage of the small land holdings and sell it to the state);
④ locally varying state interference in agrarian production (obligation imposed on villages to pursue the production of certain products such as silk, pears, etc. from which the state has no direct benefit, but disobedience is punished);
⑤ prescribing cultivation methods for certain produce;
⑥ communal work (imposed and organised by the local government, which shows a great deal of local variation but could mean a heavy burden on the individual household).[21]

The above list summarises the complaints which I heard most often from farmers in rural Kashgar during the course of open-ended interviews. All these policies, including the introduction of new crops, the modernisation of cultivation methods and the growing of a cash crop, ostensibly aimed at helping peasants to more access to cash, were seen as forms of oppression (*zulum*) and met with a great deal of resentment. These themes were also formulated in emotionally loaded publications in literary journals disguised as fiction, and in clandestinely circulated recordings of songs about the bitter life of peasants in the reform era. Peasants also defied state policies through mobilising the "weapons of the weak"[22] in numerous ways, through feigning ignorance of state policies, lying about their access to information, or silently defying them.[23]

Thus production and reproduction in rural Southern Xinjiang in the reform period have become sites where intrusive state policies were challenged. Over the last years, this

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21 Bellér-Hann 1997.

22 Cf. Scott 1985.

23 *Ibid*. Significantly, comments concerning rural policies and Kashgari farmers' everyday life emerged in the course of open-ended interviews during which questions were neutrally formulated as to the social and economic conditions of villagers. At no time did I attempt to elicit negative comments or complaints.

situation may have changed in detail but not in its basic direction, as has been confirmed by people I talked to in 2009. Since the 1990s, the cotton monopoly of the state and communal work obligations have been lifted, but the central management of agrarian production in the South has remained in place. Grain procurement still prevents many farmers from satisfying their household's subsistence needs, communal work is still levied, and the obligation to grow certain crops (including cotton) continues to be implemented locally. The perpetuation of certain repressive agricultural policies on the local level, which do not even necessarily make economic sense, may be a barely disguised attempt to continue to keep the most marginalised, yet numerically most significant group of Uighurs living in the rural South in check, who are perceived by the centre as the ultimate threat to Xinjiang's stability. Without more understanding of the workings of the state on local levels it is impossible to say how such decisions are met and why they are implemented discriminately: but even if they are not direct implementations of central directives, the fact that higher level state authorities and the party tacitly encourage or turn a blind eye to such practices, speaks volumes.

The assumption that Southern Xinjiang may be subjected to a more concentrated implementation of repressive measures is also supported by new policy directives introduced in its rural areas. One such grievance is the recruiting of young unmarried girls from rural areas for factory work in the "interior" of China, often under abysmal working conditions. According to some reports, resistance to all such policies is typically countered by imposing a substantial fine, although many people fear worse consequences.[24] In the absence of reliable research data, it is hard to tell whether farmers are deceived or openly pressured into agreeing to send their daughters, or whether the recruitment is voluntary and takes place on the initiative of individual entrepreneurs. In any case, this practice flies in the face of local tradition, which only approves of young women leaving their natal household/hometown upon marriage. It is conspicuous that to date no such recruitment has been reported from Eastern Xinjiang.

The controversial demolition of Kashgar Old Town in the name of modernisation is yet another example of regionally differentiated policies which also has enormous symbolic value: it is a spatial strategy used by Beijing to exert its control over land, resources and populations. While modernisation, demolition and reconstruction are taking place all over China, and in other parts of Xinjiang as well, targeting Kashgar which is considered the symbol of traditional Uighur culture, reminds one more of the demolition of Old Lhasa than of development projects implemented elsewhere in Xinjiang and China, and fits in well with the pattern of introducing harsher policies targeting the South.[25]

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24 http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Chinal_Final-2.pdf
http://www.uyghuramerican.org/docs/Transfer_uyghur_woman.pdf
http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/uyghur_labor-20070711.html
If these reports are to be believed, then the recruitment of female labour force from rural Southern Xinjiang closely follows patterns of the implementation of agricultural obligations; administrative units are given a certain quota which has to be met by the community. If the quota is not reached, the fine again needs to be shared by the households which make up this unit.

25 For a more detailed treatment of the demolition and reconstruction of Kashgar Old Town and modernization projects in Qumul see Bellér-Hann forthcoming a.

The enforcement of these policies is well-known and talked about all over Xinjiang, even when their implementation is region-specific. Many other policies, such as the residence regulations, family planning and the strict controls over religious observance affect all ethnic groups. A more recent policy antagonising the Uighurs all over Xinjiang is the implementation of the so-called "bilingual education", which in reality promotes Mandarin at the expense of the mother tongue and is an almost complete reversal of the generous language and cultural policies of the early reform period.[26]

People in Qumul, farmers and elites alike, share resentment of these generally repressive policies, but, in sharp contrast to the Southerners, they report no oppressive agrarian policies since the reforms were launched. Interviews suggest that here agricultural production has not been subjected to concentrated, centralised interference since the end of collectivisation. On the township and village level, farmers do get advice on production methods, but there is no enforcement, and the introduction of a new crop or a new breed is generally encouraged through granting producers price incentives. Poverty relief in the mountainous areas, where the population has long relied on a mixed economy combining animal husbandry with grain production, has been achieved by large-scale land reclamation projects which mostly took place in the 1980s and 1990s.[27] Communal work is levied, but at three to five days a year per household is negligible when compared to the burdens of the Southerners. Farmers also reported the abolition of various agricultural taxes over recent years. Residence restrictions apply, but they are less explicitly mentioned as a major grievance, perhaps because of the direct benefits of the land reclamation programmes to these communities, and also because of changing perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of these classifications.[28] Family planning regulations are in place, but, in comparison to the South, here people seem to have more readily embraced the state propaganda to have fewer children and give them quality education. At the time of fieldwork in 2006–7, rural Uighurs in Qumul who formally agreed to give up their right to the maximum number of children to which they are entitled were rewarded financially. Farmers were by and large satisfied with the state sponsored health care system, which, however, was still at its early, experimental stage at the time. Religious repression also applies to Qumul, and we did hear about clampdowns on distributors of unauthorised religious literature in 2007. However, in Qumul we did not hear of restricting religious worship and rituals conducted in private homes or at shrines, which has been the case in the Kashgar – Khotan area for at least a decade.[29]

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26 Dwyer 2005, Schluessel 2007 and Feng & Sunuodula 2009.

27 Due to increasing water shortage, no new large-scale land reclamation is possible any more, but the establishment of four new settlements in the 1980s and 1990s have eased at least some of the pressures on the resources of traditional villages, for example in the mountainous Tianshan township located about 50 km east of Qumul. For a deeper analysis of the political economy of this area see Hann 2011.

28 The *hukou* regulations have in recent years become more relaxed in some parts of China but remain firmly in place in Xinjiang.

29 In the summer of 2005, while travelling around Southern Xinjiang, we came across examples of repressive religious policy implementation. At one large shrine pilgrims were allowed to come and worship but they were not supposed to spend the night there, which for many is an essential part of the pilgrimage experience. When pilgrims broke this rule, they risked being reported by the guardians of the shrine or by fellow pilgrims to the authorities. Such reporting took place because of the financial rewards promised to the informants and could have severe consequences for those reported. In another

Some people in Qumul cite other small but sure signs of what appears to be relative "state leniency" in the East:[30] some say that in Southern Xinjiang today it is a criminal act to refer to the Chinese by the derogatory term "Khitay", while in Qumul Uighurs may habitually engage in doing just that without any consequences.[31] If this appears irrelevant at first glance, we must remember that Uighurs all over Xinjiang are subjected to restrictions of freedom of speech. The significance attributed to this alleged difference also underlines how the power of words is recognised by all major players in the social drama which is currently being acted out in Xinjiang.

Further proof of differential treatment is not hard to find: in the wake of the violence in Urumchi in 2009, the Southern oases (which were not the scene of inter-ethnic violence that summer) were visibly patrolled by the military, while no such material display of state power was staged in the Eastern oases at the time. Although political slogans were everywhere, here they merely reminded the passers-by of the need for the unity of nationalities. The threatening tones announcing punishment for separatists, ubiquitous in the streets of Urumchi as well as in the South, were largely absent here. Significantly, the violence was blamed by the Chinese media on troublemakers from Southern Xinjiang in Urumchi. While undoubtedly there must have been petty traders and other rural migrants of southern origin among those involved, it is interesting that the official narrative chose to emphasise not so much the disenfranchisement of the Uighur "rioters" in general but their specific geographical origins. This kind of emphasis further accentuates the rhetoric that Uighurs in the South consistently resist the benevolent policies of the Communist Party.

In May 2010, new guidelines were formulated within the framework of a set of new economic policies announced at the Xinjiang Work Forum,[32] which convened less than a year after the violent events in Urumchi. Directly triggered by conflict between Uighur and Han workers in a toy factory situated far away from Xinjiang in Guandong province, observers see the underlying cause of the unrest in Uighurs' frustration over their economic discrimination as well as in restrictions in religious practice and other policies which Uighurs experience as repressive. Henryk Szadziewski sees in the launching of the Xinjiang Work Forum a tacit admission of the worsening economic conditions among the Uighur.[33] He argues that in some ways, these policies are a continuation and exacerbation of the more general policies outlined in the "Develop the West" campaign launched ten years earlier, in which development and security remain the twin obejctives and, while its implementation and impact are still difficult to assess, they also confirm a certain sensitivity to intra-regional differences. One interesting aspect of the Xinjiang Work Forum seems to be the pairing of 19 provinces and municipalities from the East Coast of China with 82 poor prefectures of Xinjiang. Although this pairing plan has inherent problems, it is relevant that

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case a local cadre responsible for religious affairs boasted how the communal Koran recitation held in a private home by a large group of rural women was criminalised and how the women and their families were facing large fines.

30 This is my term and I have not come across an Uighur equivalent.

31 This may be followed by reflecting that such issues could only come to the notice of the Chinese authorities if local Uighurs report on each other; in Qumul no Uighur would behave so dishonourably (so people say).

32 Toops 2010 and Szadziewski 2011.

33 Szadziewski 2011, p. 100.

the investment targeting Southern Xinjang appears to be more ambitious than the one foreseen for Qumul, especially in the light of the establishment of a special economic zone in Kashgar.[34]

Discourse on oasis identities

At the time of fieldwork Uighurs in Qumul were aware of the differences in the treatment of the two regions and their relative freedom from government interference, especially in rural areas. These differences between the two regions were also articulated by officials and scholars in Urumchi and Beijing; Qumul was perceived as more docile and peaceful than the South, (hence the possibility to allow foreign researchers to work there; permission to work in the South in 2006–7 was categorically denied).

Justin Rudelson has argued for the continued salience of oasis loyalties in Xinjiang, especially before the emergence of Uighur ethnic sentiments.[35] Oasis membership was often mentioned in identity discourses during field research without any prompting in both regions, although I paid more attention to them in Qumul, where Kashgar was often used as a yardstick against which the qualities of the Uighur of Qumul could be measured and evaluated.[36] These discourses projected the Uighurs of the South as simple, boorish, less sophisticated, less generous, less committed to the education of their children than the people of Qumul, who in turn were characterised as more civilised, advanced, open to progress and better educated. While Uighur society in Kashgar was described as hierarchical, the people of Qumul prided themselves on their commitment to social equality, which explains, for example, the absence of big landowners in Qumul in the past, and the lack of the tradition of begging. All the beggars appearing in the streets of Qumul at the time of the Islamic holidays were said to have come from the South. The absence of local beggars also fed into the discourse about kin solidarity: in Qumul no one would allow their relatives to go begging. Taking this a step further, it was argued that the inhabitants of Qumul not only possess stronger family and kinship values as well as a heightened sense of communal spirit, but also display greater piety, which is best illustrated by the large crowds drawn to funerals. But the stereotypes were not completely one-sided. Uighurs in Kashgar were credited with being excellent businessmen: local discourse emphasised the limited importance of Qumul as a trading centre in the past and its relative isolation, in contrast to Kashgar, which was an important commercial hub along the Silk Road, and its merchants were well-travelled. Commerce in Qumul in "feudal times" (which in local reckoning lasted until 1930) was under the strict control of the local ruling family, whose exclusive trade monopoly prevented the subject population from developing the necessary skills. My interview partners frequently stressed the differences in the Uighur dialects spoken in the two regions, and in this connection it was often pointed out that the Uighur in Qumul tend

34 See http://www.chinanews.com/df/2012/01-12/3601045.shtml and http://www.aboutxinjiang.com/topic/content/2011-07/22/content_6061839.htm (both accessed on 17th January 2012).
I thank Henryk Szadziewski for drawing my attention to these details.

35 Rudelson 1997.

36 Kashgar was often mentioned in an extended sense, referring to the whole of Southern Xinjiang.

to have more knowledge of Mandarin than is the case in the South. Thus, the “othering” of the South is incorporated in the identity discourse of the inhabitants of the East.

The stereotyping of the Uighurs of Southern Xinjiang was strategically used for self-definition and appears to be part of locally salient discourses on oasis identities, but does not offer an explanation for the differences in state policies between the two regions. When policy differences were addressed directly, they were explicitly connected to differences in demography and history. This discourse emphasised that in the East the Han outnumber the Uighurs, while the South is still the area where Uighurs live in the largest concentration in the XUAR. Such reasoning is based on the demographic distribution of the major ethnic groups in different parts of Xinjiang, which in turn has its roots in diverging regional histories.

Discourses on history

According to the master narrative or narrative of dominance[37] which prevails in history books and officially sanctioned publications in China, Xinjiang has from time immemorial belonged to the territory of the Chinese polity. This contrasts sharply with Uighur nationalist views, which regard Xinjiang as their homeland, although at present there is no room for putting forward alternative views in public.[38] Neither of these views is fully accepted by international scholarship, which takes the stance that parts of the region had, since the Han dynasty, often been drawn into the Chinese political interest sphere through the establishment of military outposts, but it was only in the middle of the eighteenth century that the Manchu Qing Dynasty incorporated the region on a more permanent basis into the Middle Kingdom. From the seventh century onwards, waves of Turkic speaking nomadic groups found their way into the region where they mingled with the local sedentary populations, who spoke Indo-European languages.[39] They, together with the admixture of Mongolians, Chinese, Tibetans and others, contributed to the complex ethnogenesis of the modern Uighurs.[40] In the course of the following centuries, most if not all nomadic groups switched to a sedentary life, embraced a variety of religions and developed high levels of literacy already prior to the advent of Islam. Between the tenth and fifteenth centuries two major processes, Islamisation from the West and Turkification from the East, contributed to the shaping of the ethnic, linguistic and religious make up of what later became Xinjiang. Following the Mongol invasion, the Turkic speaking sedentary Muslims of the different oases were governed by indigenous theocracies, which were in constant rivalry with each other. From the seventeenth century the Zunghar confederation occupied much of the region and local rulers often drew on shifting alliances with either the Qing or the Zunghar in order to settle their conflicts and to ensure their independence. The pacification of the Western Regions, which in effect meant their incorporation into the Qing Empire during the eighteenth century, resulted in a form of indirect rule: local power holders were co-opted to mediate between the Manchus and the tax-paying population.[41]

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37 Lyotard 1977.
38 For contested views on history see Bovingdon 2001 and Bovingdon 2010.
39 For Western summaries see Millward 2007 and Millward & Tursun 2004.
40 Gladney 1990.
41 By the late nineteenth century the local population had come to equate Manchu rule with Chinese rule

The number of Chinese migrants into the region was kept under control and banner soldiers, merchants, exiles and officials were carefully separated from the natives. To prevent antagonising the Muslim population, the Manchu authorities tried from time to time to limit the excesses and corruption of local officials, especially following periods of social unrest and rebellions. In 1884, after the last major Muslim rebellion had been put down, the region was recognised as a fully-fledged province of the Empire, and was brought under the direct control of the centre. However, the mediation of local power-holders persisted, and, with occasional short-term exceptions, the centre continued its policy of not interfering in everyday life and daily practices as long as stability was maintained and taxes were collected. This state of affairs continued to some extent even after the demise of the Qing dynasty. The ensuing period was characterised by the chaotic and often oppressive rule of Chinese warlords, and only the incorporation of the region into the People's Republic in 1949 brought major political changes entailing drastic state interference into the lives of all social groups in all geographical regions.

Although both systems represented a form of indirect rule which relied on the co-option and collaboration of local power holders to mediate between the centre and the local population,[42] Qing policies introduced in the East differed greatly from policies introduced in the South. The fundamental difference in imperial policies concerned the co-opted local elite. In Southern Xinjiang this was done through the establishment of the so-called *beg* system. Indigenous power holders (*beg*s) were incorporated into the imperial system: they were put in charge of collecting revenues, of keeping order and settling internal disputes among the natives.[43] It was important for the Qing to prevent the emergence of a local dynasty which could then build up a strong power base. Therefore, appointments at the highest level of the local hierarchy strictly followed what could be termed an "avoidance policy": high ranking local officials were always appointed to office away from their native oasis, and their offices were not hereditary. The situation differed in the East, where from the late seventeenth century a local, Turkic speaking Muslim dynasty (anachronistically some modern historians refer to them as an "Uighur" dynasty), was able to establish itself with the active backing of the Manchus. Popularly known as the *wang*, they ruled the "12 mountains, 5 cities and 24 villages" of Eastern Xinjiang over 233 years and nine generations,[44] handing down office from father to son until 1930, thus surviving the demise of the Qing dynasty and the Empire.[45]

so the two terms are used here as synonyms (Newby 1998).

42 The system was significantly modified in the course of history: following the defeat of the Muslim rebellions and the Qing reconquest, important administrative reforms were introduced by the Qing to govern directly on the local level. However, these reforms could not eliminate the mediation of local officials (Millward 2007, p. 140).

43 Newby 1998 and Millward 1998.

44 Some speak of twelve generations. This is one of the many small details in which local historical narratives disagree with each other. An elaboration of such details will follow in another publication.

45 Hereditary *wang*s were also installed in Turpan; these had close blood ties with the *wang*s of Qumul through repeated intermarriages. On the multiple jurisdiction in Xinjiang under the Qing see Perdue 2005, p. 339 and Sugawara in this volume. For an early summary of the history of the Qumul *wang* until the end of the nineteenth century on the basis of Chinese sources see Imbault-Huart 1892.

The differential treatment of the South and the East under the Qing can thus be explained historically: from the seventeenth century, a considerable part of Xinjiang was brought under the rule of the Zunghar, whose presence provoked the resistance of the sedentary Muslim population and simultaneously posed a hindrance to imperial expansionist policies. Local Muslim rulers in both regions often resorted to short term alliances with either the Chinese or the Zunghar against the other, but they also relied on them to solve internal strife.[46] The close alliance between the local aristocracy of the East and the Qing started well before the Qing conquest of region; when in the last years of the seventeenth century the Hami (Qumul) *beg* asked for Qing protection against the Zunghars, the area was formally brought under Manchu control, thus becoming the first oasis ruled by Muslims to join the Qing polity.[47] In subsequent decades the Qumul *wang*s supported the imperial banners with troops and provisions, participated in the Qing conquest of Xinjiang, sent tribute missions to Beijing and built up so much credibility in Beijing that they were exempt from paying taxes to the state, received prestigious titles and imperial ranks and acquiescence in their hereditary rule.[48] In contrast, the Muslims of the South had no history of particular loyalty to the centre, an imperial legacy which has doggedly persisted into the present. In these developments, the relative geographical proximity of the oasis of Qumul to the imperial centre must have played a central part: following the fall of the Ming, from the Chinese perspective Qumul remained the gateway to the Western Regions for centuries and ensuring its close alliance and support was a precondition of the Qing conquest of the region later named Xinjiang.

According to the hegemonic narrative produced by official historians of the People’s Republic, the *wang* lineage (*jämät*) practised feudal exploitation over the subject population which consisted mostly of Turkic speaking Muslim farmers, but it also points out the close collaboration and mutual assistance between the imperial centre and the *wang* over the centuries. In this narrative the extreme loyalty and unquestioned subordination of the *wang* to the Manchus is emphasised, to which they responded with supporting the *wang* regime economically.[49]

Local oral tradition also displays a certain ambivalence, albeit different from that elaborated in the master narrative; some project *wang* rule as the embodiment of good governance, others describe them as feudal oppressors. However, even those who vilify the *wang*s make no reference to their close cooperation with the imperial centre over centuries, which constitutes the *leitmotif* of official historical accounts of the region.[50] This consistent omission in Uighur narratives may be due to the ethnic implications: the local dynasty is perceived as having been both Uighur and Muslim, whose cooperation with the imperial

46 Conversely, the Manchus and the Zunghars often pitted local power-holders against each other to gain advantages from their internal conflicts.

47 Perdue 2005, p. 199.

48 *Ibid*., p. 351 and Millward 2007, p. 100.

49 Su & Huang 1991 and Qumul wilayitlik täzkirä komiteti 2005.

50 In some individual narratives we come across references to more interethnic mingling in “traditional” (i.e. pre-socialist) society, which is said to have made the inhabitants of Qumul more like the Han in facial features than is the case in the South. Some mention the relative frequency of pre-socialist adoption practices, which mostly involved the adoption of Han children by local Uighurs, who were then socialised and brought up as Turkic speaking Muslims.

centre clearly does not fit the contemporary vision of Chinese state versus Uighur society inadvertently promoted by *minzu* policies and embraced by local actors.[51]

Differentiated policies by Beijing at present were explained locally either in terms of demography or by reference to history. Those who privileged the demographic factor stated that, since Uighurs in Qumul are outnumbered by the Han, the latter have little to fear – there is no need for exaggerated heavy-handedness. Others resorted to carefully selected episodes of local rebellions in regional history to interpret the present. In the early twentieth century, several waves of peasant uprisings shook Eastern Xinjiang: one of these is connected to the name of a local Turkic speaking Muslim lineage and is called the 'Torpaklar rebellion" which took place in 1907. The other two are each named after their leaders, (Tömür Xälpä rebellion in 1913, Haji Niyaz Xojam rebellion in 1930), whose names and heroic deeds have been included and celebrated in oral tradition. The last uprising gained special significance for the history of Xinjiang in general, since it ushered in the events which gave rise to the founding of the First Eastern Turkestan Republic, a brief but important period of political independence for the Uighur. Such narratives extol the heroism of local Uighurs, of the people (*xälq*) against the oppressors. Expanding on this theme, some of my interview partners claimed that this heroic and rebellious past of Qumul generates *fear* in the Han and prevent them from treating the people from Qumul as harshly as they treat the Uighurs of the South, thus turning the story of alliance and accommodation stressed by the hegemonic master narrative on its head. By implication, the Southerners are less rebellious and are more likely to be subjugated, although no one has ever stated such a view openly.[52]

Conclusion

The contrasting local and hegemonic historical discourses have one common denominator, which is their emphasis on Qumul (and, by extension also Xinjiang) as borderland. The borderland emerging from these various interpretations is an area subjected to contestation between Han and Uighur, between Chinese state and Uighur society. This contrasts sharply with the views of Cable and French, the British missionaries who visited the oasis of Qumul in the early twentieth century. For them, it was this borderland nature which accounted for the complex ethnogenesis of the peoples of Qumul and for the cosmopolitanism they observed there: upon entering Xinjiang from Kansu, from Hami (Qumul) onwards they "met men of so many tribes and nations as to make us realise how little we had hitherto known of the peoples of this vast continent," including Chinese from all provinces of China, as well as Turki, Tungan, Mongolian, Kalmuk, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Nogai, Manchu, Russian and others.[53]

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51 Such voices are also missing when members of the Uighur elite in Urumchi with roots in other oases evaluate the people from Qumul. In commenting on their "temperament" (*mijäz*) or psychological make-up, it is their "free spirit" and "freedom fighter" image which are emphasised. For an elaboration of this topic see Bellér-Hann forthcoming b.

52 In evaluating these rebellions, the master narrative and local views diverge again: the master narrative emphasises the anti-feudal character of the rebellions which were directed against the *wang*, while local Uighurs insist on their anti-Han and therefore anti-state character (*Ibid.*).

53 Cable & French 1927 p. 232.

Neither the master nor the local narratives do justice to the multi-ethnic nature attributed to the oasis by the British missionaries; they prefer to exclusively focus on the Han and the Uighur, thus echoing the main concerns of contemporary actors. But, in a curious twist, local narratives also introduce and capitalise on regional divisions derived both from sub-regional loyalties as well as from selected specificities of local history to promote the ethno-national cause which *connects* them to the Uighurs of the South.

The Chinese state in Xinjiang presents itself as a "strong state", acting out a unified ideology in the XUAR: certainly, policies of religious repression, bilingual education, family planning and residence constraints are applied all over Xinjiang. In spite of this, a closer look at policy directives and implementation reveals considerable differences, as has been exemplified by agrarian policies or the labour migration of young women. The increasingly repressive ethnic policies contribute to strengthening the sentiment of ethnic unity among the Uighur, in spite of the awareness that some sub-regions are subjected to a somewhat more lenient treatment than others.

In a partial effort to explain this as well as the specificities of their own sub-region, actualised history is produced by the state and by the Uighurs of Qumul very differently, since both are faced with difficulties inherent in the entanglement of ethnic confrontation and the complications caused by the dual loci of power in the past. While the master narrative stresses the Uighur elite's collaboration with the Qing and its key role in the Qing conquest of Xinjiang, locals focus on the peasant rebellions as sources of regional pride; this discourse at the same time feeds into the dichotomised discourse of Chinese state and Uighur society, and ultimately strengthens Uighur ethno-nationalism. This is supported by fieldwork data collected in the two sub-regions which suggest that Uighur attitudes to the Han and to Chinese dominance in general today are not very different in Eastern and in Southern Xinjiang.

While under the present circumstances the Uighur society vs. Chinese state dichotomy continues to be further polarised, it also harbours a great deal of complexities. Not only is Chinese state ideology translated differently in the XUAR than in most other parts of the country, but, as I have shown, within the XUAR one can detect regional differences in actual policy implementation. I have argued that this differential treatment between the East and the South may have as much to do with perceived historical experience as with demographic differences in the ethnic ratio between the Han and the Uighur, (which in turn are also rooted in history) as well as with "bottom-up" oasis loyalties. It remains open to speculation to what extent the hegemonic perspective on history informs policy directives and implementation in various sub-regions. If the present treatment of the Uighurs of the Eastern oases by the Chinese state may indeed be explained not just by demographic factors but also by historical experience (i.e. by the perceived political proximity of the inhabitants of Qumul to the Chinese state), then it is possible that through its policy-makers the state itself valorises differences which are constructed from historical legitimation narratives.

As I have argued at the beginning of this chapter, regional differences are best captured by conceptualising society not as a system but as relational clusters in which institutions, social practices and public narratives interact. This approach enables us to account for regional differences over the *longue durée*, which are at least partly informed by struggles over legitimacy and identity in the narrative arena. Taking notice of these internal dividing

lines allows us a better understanding of the complexities camouflaged by the dichotomous perspective presently dominating interethnic relations in this troubled part of China.

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