



Xinjiang: A Region of Struggle or Curse?

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Abstract

Uyghurs can currently be said to be seen as a second-class population by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The hometown and ancestral village of the Uyghur ethnic group is Xinjiang. Meanwhile, the government actually encourages Han ethnic groups to migrate to and reproduce in Xinjiang. Get rid of it in a subtle way. On the other hand, the Uyghur ethnic group finds it difficult to carry out Islamic religious law, while in other places, this religion is allowed to develop. Thus, it seems that the background to the Uyghur conflict with the government so far is the Xinjiang region factor. The research method used is a qualitative method, namely a case study. Xinjiang is currently a controversial and very complex region. Views and interpretations can vary widely, depending on political perspectives, culture, and the sources of information used.

Keywords: *Uyghur; Xinjiang; Region; Republic of China*

Introduction

Until now, Xi Jinping's government considers Uyghurs as a rebellious, radical and even terrorist group or ethnicity, which therefore gives rise to the ability to take repressive measures (Rosyidin, 2020). Regarding the fate of Uyghurs today, Misri A Muchsin describes that many of them are tortured, raped and detained en masse. In fact, performing worship such as prayer and fasting is prohibited in the open. Many mosques were demolished on the grounds that there was no construction permit even though the place of worship had been established for decades or even centuries (Muchsin, 2019).

Uyghur is an ethnic group in China native to East Turkestan. China's official name for this East Turkestan region is known as Xinjiang or Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region (XUAR). The Uyghur people themselves prefer to call their region Uyghuristan or East Turkistan. (Setiawan, 2003).

Although Xinjiang is actually the ancestral land of the Uyghurs, according to Tempo Team records in 2020, Xinjiang is now inhabited by approximately 8 million ethnic Han and 10 million ethnic Uyghurs. This is proof of the success of the Beijing government, which since 60 years ago

launched a Han tribal migration programme to control the Xinjiang region. In fact, in 1949, the Han tribe in Xinjiang was only around 220 thousand people (Tempo, 2020).

On the one hand, Xinjiang is China's largest province, which should of course be an important area for the state to nurture both its natural and human resources. However, in reality, the central government is visibly inconveniencing the indigenous population and labelling them as radicals, rebels and terrorists (Fuller, 2014).

Xinjiang is also a Muslim-majority region because the Uyghurs have been adherents of Islam since the 10th century. Before the arrival of Islam, Uyghurs were Shamanian, Manichaenism and finally Buddhist. (Amin, 2020).

Of China's 1.3 billion population, an estimated 1-2 per cent are Muslims, or about 22 million people. The majority are centred in the Xinjiang autonomous region, Jinghai and Gansu Provinces. However, Muslims are spread almost all over China. Of the approximately 56 tribes in China, there are approximately 10 tribes that have Muslim communities in them, namely Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Tartar, Salar, Dongxiang, Tajik, Uzbek, Baoan, Mongol, Tibetan, Dai and Bai. (Utomo, 2013). The Hui and the Uyghurs are the two largest tribes adhering to Islam. The number of Hui tribe currently reaches 9,816,802 or approximately 48% of the entire Muslim population in China. The name Hui comes from the abbreviation Hui-Hui which means middle. They are very easy to recognise, because their clothes alone show the characteristics of a Muslim. The men have white skullcaps and some have beards and the women mostly wear headscarves. In big cities, it can be seen that most of them sell food or open stalls and restaurants that always have the word halal written on the door either in kanji or Arabic (Anonymous, 2015). Admiral Cheng Ho was a Hui who according to Chinese data and beliefs, the American continent was discovered by Cheng ho, not Marcopolo. At least, according to them, Cheng ho was the predecessor of Columbus and Vasco Da Gama.

Islam itself is one of the religions that thrives in the majority of communist China. Information obtained in Wikipedia uploaded on Friday 19 January 2024, states that according to the most recent demographic analysis, around 73.56% of the population in China, who have no religion / atheism, 15.87% practice Taoism, People's Sects and other religious organisations, 2.53% are Christian, and 1.7% are Muslim, in addition to religion.

Local and traditional Han Chinese. They coexist in every corner of China's cities and regions, with the exception of the Uyghur Muslims who are often mistreated as a consequence of their adherence to Islamic law, even in their own ancestral land of Xinjiang.

On the other hand, in some cases there are some parties who actually had time to express criticism and even unsympathy for the attitude shown by Uyghur, the owner of the Xinjiang region. Sulaiman Tanjung for example, the Deputy Secretary General of PBNU in the January 2024 edition of Aula magazine regretted the statement of Uyghur World President Dolkun Isa who criticised Hamas and other groups that helped Palestine become independent in the World Uyghur Congress 20-12-2023. Likewise with Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish President expelled Uyghur refugees who asked for refuge in Turkey (Nainggolan, 2020).

The phenomenon of the Uyghurs and Xinjiang is very interesting to study, especially in relation to the attitude of the central government itself which seems to have been very antipasti towards the Uyghurs while on the other hand it is very unlikely to just release Xinjiang from the embrace of Chinese state power. This research is focused on the study of the region, namely Xinjiang with the formulation of the problem as the title. What is the actual attitude of the Chinese government towards the existence of Xinjiang? Is this region considered and positioned as a gift that must be seized and controlled or is it a curse? The Chinese government's conflict with the Uyghur ethnic group has extended the number of cases of internal conflict after the Second World War. It is even more interesting to study considering that China is classified as a developed country, whereas generally internal conflicts occur in developing

countries because they usually stem from domestic instability and weak economic stability of a country (Crevelde, 1991).

Methodology

To get answers to the questions as outlined in the background above, the research method used is a qualitative method, namely a case study. Therefore, the type of data explored and used is qualitative data. The data analysis technique used is the tracing process. This process is one of the methods in qualitative research, especially in case study studies. This process also tries to prove the truth of the theory and test causal relationships. Based on its definition, the tracing process is an instrument for making descriptions and causal inferences from a set of facts that are part of a phenomenon (Collier, 2011) related to Xinjiang, so that it is possible to understand the narratives built by various parties.

Discussion

c.1. Xinjiang

Xinjiang linguistically means *new territory* or *new frontier*, which means new frontier (Bengke, 2022). It is located in north-northwest China. It has been an autonomous province since 1955, with the official name Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), capitalised in Urumqi.

Xinjiang was included in China's territory starting from the Qing dynasty's efforts to include Xinjiang in China's sovereign territory in 1884. The name Xinjiang was also given and began to be used during the Manchu Qing dynasty. China further occupied Xinjiang in 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party took power from the nationalists. Finally, in 1955, Xinjiang became an autonomous region under the PRC, having previously been integrated through the "*Peaceful Liberation*" act by the Chinese Communist Government (Wardhani, 2018).

The Xinjiang region has long been surrounded by the great and influential empires of China, Russia and India. Today, Xinjiang borders Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan and India, a region with many cultural relics. (Pundilaras, 2023). Due to its location on the famous Silk Road, Xinjiang played an important role in the cultural exchange between East and West, so they have a unique culture and civilisation.

The Land Route or better known as the *Silk Road*. It is the oldest and most famous trade route, which has connected China, Central Asia and West Asia. The Silk Road became famous through trade and cultural exchanges (Iqbal, 2018).

The Silk Road became Xinjiang's communication link with various ethnicities and even empires, including the Romans. The Silk Road also brought blessings and made cultural exchanges quite intense in the Xinjiang region which also led to making this region very rich in culture. Among the evidence, the people of Xinjiang are known to be very fond of dance and singing. Unesco itself has designated it as a "*Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*". (Mackerras, 2009). Sanam dance, for example, is the most popular dance among Uyghurs.

Of the total 9.6 million square kilometres of the People's Republic of China (PRC), an estimated one-sixth is Xinjiang province. According to Jacouline Leckie's account, Xinjiang covers an estimated 1,660,000 square kilometres (Jacouline, 2016). The region consists of mountains and fertile farmland. At its centre stands Tianshan mountain, one of the highest mountains in China, which is covered in snow throughout the year. The Tengritengh Mountains divide Xinjiang into two parts, north and south. The north is colder with high levels of rainfall and snowfall, while the south is drier and warmer. The south is

home to the world's second largest desert, the Taklimakan Desert. The north is known for its fertile valleys, rivers and mountains and is home to nomadic people from Kazakhstan and Mongol Torgut to this day. (Haloeducation, 2024)

As a cold and fertile region, Xinjiang has become a storehouse of various fruits and vegetables such as a wide variety of grapes, walnuts and a variety of fruits and vegetables.

kinds of pomegranates (Baidlowi, 2023). Because of this, most Uyghurs are farmers. They excel in irrigation techniques as they are able to transform arid areas into land for crop cultivation, one of which is "karez", which is the construction and maintenance of underground channels that carry water from the mountains to the fields. There are several famous agricultural products, including apples (from the Ghulja region), grapes (from Turpan), and sweet melons (from Hami). It is said that the green grapes that Arab merchants used to sell to Hajj and Umrah pilgrims in the holy land come from this land of Xinjiang.

Xinjiang is also the largest producer of cotton, lavender and hops. The lavender crop area and production in Ili County account for 90% of the national total. In addition, with the second largest grassland, Xinjiang is one of China's sheep and wool production bases. Xinjiang is also rich in energy resources. The region has the largest reserves of oil, natural gas and copper, coal, timber and some other mineral resources (Warikoo, 2016). The coal reserves amount to 40% of the country's total. The oil and gas reserves found in Tarim, Junggar and Turpan-Hami regions of Xinjiang are one-quarter and one-third of the country's total. Xinjiang even has large mineral resources as well. There are more than 130 types of mineral deposits established. Beryllium and mica reserves in the region are the highest in China (Karisma, 2017).

Many Uyghurs also work in the mining, manufacturing and petrochemical industries. In addition, the Uyghur home industries also play an important role in sustaining their economic system, such as rug weaving and jade carving. The Uyghurs are also famous for their ability to process gold, stone, silk and leather goods. Apart from China, the population is also spread across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The Uyghurs, along with the Hui, are the main Muslim tribes in China, but there are obvious cultural and l i f e s t y l e differences between them. The Uyghurs are more Sufi while the Hui are more Hanafi (Utomo, 2013). Muslims in China are basically divided into two major ethnic groups, namely the Hui who are representatives of the pure Chinese population (*Chinese Proper*) spread in several urban areas in China, the other is Uyghur who is an ethnic descendant of *old Turkic (old Turkic)* spread mainly in northwestern China. Xinjiang is predominantly populated by Uyghurs, who are descended from

Turks. Of the approximately 19 million population, about 46 per cent are Uyghurs. They have embraced Sunni Islam since the 10th century and use approximately 24,000 mosques led and nurtured by 29,000 clerics in Xinjiang. The most religious Muslim areas include Kashgar, Yarkand and Khotan (Wardhani, 2018). Historically, the Uyghurs were attacked by Christianity, but the spread failed and came to a complete halt. Uyghurs are the second Muslim ethnicity in China after the Hui.

In general, outside of the specificity of Xinjiang-Uyghur, Islam in China is a religion that is able to survive with all its dynamics, and even tends to be able to adapt to the ruler at all times. When Islam first came into contact with China, it was the Tang Dynasty (618-907), which was based in Chang'an. These contacts were mainly related to trade and military affairs. During the middle of the Tang Dynasty, when the An and Shi rebellions occurred, the Tang government was also reported to have asked the Arab empire for military assistance. Arab soldiers were even allowed to settle in China after the rebellion was over (Shoujiang, 2014).

After the Tang Dynasty, which succeeded the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE), Islam continued to play a role in the Chinese government and society. When the Song Dynasty (960-1279) reigned, Muslims

also controlled the export and import industries. In fact, in that period the position of director general of shipping was consistently held by Muslims (Widjaja, 2013).

After power passed to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) who were descendants of the Han (*Proper Chinese*), the spread of Islam also became more widespread. The Muslim population grew very rapidly in Nanjing, the capital of the Ming Dynasty. This period is one of the most important phases in the history of Islam in China. It was during this period that Cheng Ho, a very famous Muslim admiral and a diplomat of the Ming Dynasty, emerged. During this period, Muslims were given the freedom to practice their religion as normal civilians (Ji, 2014).

Entering the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), Chinese Muslims faced a phase filled with several incidents of rebellion and bloody conflicts. The first incident occurred in 1644. A Ming Dynasty Muslim loyalist from Gansu attacked the Qing Dynasty trying to seize the imperial throne. In addition, sectarian conflicts also occurred in northwest China involving three sects of Islam, namely the Gedimu, Khafiya and Jahriya. The trigger was a difference of opinion between local Muslims and the new ideas brought by some Muslim scholars who studied Islam outside China (Krause, TT).

Entering the Communist era, Chinese Muslims became part of the minority. Like other religions, during this period of ideological restraint (1950- 1960 decades), Muslims also experienced persecution (Muchsin, 2019). Liu Baojun gave an example that in Qinghai province after 1958 there were only 8 mosques left, from the previous 931 mosques. There were only 12 imams in the mosques, up from 5940.

During the Cultural Revolution, there were no mosques and no imams left in the province. The performance of Islamic obligations such as the five daily prayers and the pilgrimage were not permitted. The latter caused Chinese Muslims to experience a disconnection with other Muslim countries and made their younger generation experience a gap in the understanding of Islam (Al Atas, 2015). However, since the reign of Deng Xiaoping in 1979 and China's openness to the international community, slowly, some of these policies were reviewed and eliminated. Many Chinese Muslims are allowed to perform the Hajj pilgrimage, some mosques are also rebuilt in the capital city. But, of course, it is not over yet because the Chinese Muslim community, especially the Uyghur tribe, seems to still have a long way to go to stand as high and sit as low as other brothers.

Until now, the Chinese government's attitude towards the Uyghurs has been different from that of other ethnic Muslims. After knowing the origin, potential and understanding of Uyghur diversity, to enrich knowledge about Xinjiang, from the aspect of the language spoken by them, according to Mahmud al-Kashgari, in the 11th century the ethnic Uyghur community in Qocho spoke pure Turkish. Their vocal harmonies were also similar to Turkish. Even today, there are still many ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang who do not speak Mandarin.

The food of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang is a mix of food commonly served among Central Asians and Chinese. One of the most typical is polu, which is a mixture of carrots and mutton (or chicken) that is first fried in oil and onions, then rice and water are added and steamed. Sprinkle raisins or dried apricots over the dish once cooked.

There are several other foods commonly eaten by the Uyghur people, such as kawaplar, kebabs, leghmen, samsa and goshnan (grilled lamb pies), youtazi (multi-layered steamed bread), shorpa (lamb soup), girde (similar to bagels), and so on.

In addition, each region has its own speciality fruit that tastes fresh and dry depending on the climate. The Uyghurs also have their own speciality tea, called naam (HaloEdukasi, 2024).

The geographical location, origin and religion of course greatly affect the body physique, behaviour and daily clothing. Outside of the Uyghurs, there are also many Chinese nationalities who

embrace Islam, one of which is the Hui. The origin of the two is different, Uyghur has a taller height, not squinting, many of them are born with blond hair, both men and women. As a devout Muslim woman, the majority of Uyghur women wear a headscarf, not even a few are veiled. The men, in addition to beards, often their heads are *kupyah*, even if many wear a turban on Friday (Shoujiang, 2014).

Uyghurs are native to Xinjiang, but they are classed as an ethnic minority in the PRC. Since the communist takeover of the area in 1949, Uyghurs have often suffered religious and cultural persecution by Han Chinese. Moreover, following the discovery of abundant oil and natural resources in the region, Han Chinese flooded into Xinjiang to exploit them. The massive migration of Han people to Xinjiang Province has also caused Uyghurs to feel left out by the repressive behaviour of the Han people, which is supported by the Chinese Government.

This has led the Uyghurs to strengthen their identity, resulting in extreme measures, namely demanding independence and establishing a separate state. One of the factors that reinforces their desire for secession is that the Uyghurs feel that Xinjiang is not part of the People's Republic of China. The Uyghurs' non-recognition of China's sovereignty means that the Chinese government has little legitimacy in the region. The 2009 Urumqi crisis marked the Chinese government's failure to address ethnic issues and secessionist demands in the Xinjiang region. It signalled the importance of the nationality issue for the Chinese Government.

C.2. China's Government Stance

Geopolitically, the Xinjiang region is very important to the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), especially because this region is a *buffer zone* for China (Clarke, 2018).

In addition to its abundant natural resources, Xinjiang's geographical location is also considered very strategic considering that the region is directly adjacent to several different neighbouring countries. There are eight countries that directly border the region, which is legally one of China's autonomous regions. The Chinese government argues that the granting of autonomous rights is because Xinjiang is located quite far from Beijing as the centre of government. But in reality, everything is very tightly regulated by the central government. Xinjiang can be a determinant of China's national stability because it is not impossible for Xinjiang to become a place for *illegal trafficking*, drug and human smuggling, both to and from Central Asia. (Karisma, 2107)

Whatever the situation, it seems difficult for the Chinese government to just let go of Xinjiang even though the Uyghurs, who are ethnic natives, are trying to secede. The Chinese government is very interested in securing every inch of Xinjiang to remain in its lap. As evidence, when many parties provide advice and input regarding Xinjiang, it is always answered by stating that this is a domestic issue and policy, no party has the right to interfere (Tanggok, 2010). At least, there are several important reasons underlying this attitude of the Chinese government.

Firstly, territorial considerations. Xinjiang's location is very strategic and favourable for the Chinese government. Several countries are directly adjacent to Xinjiang, even connecting Central Asian countries with Europe, especially the *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)* project. Based on this reason, the Chinese government has been willing to develop infrastructure for the benefit of transportation, power generation and other projects in Xinjiang (Dano, 2022).

Secondly, although not the only one, Xinjiang is a granary of wealth for the Chinese state. The Chinese government relies heavily on raw materials sourced from this region. This is what then triggered the massive migration of the Han tribe and received negligence from the government (Mandryc, 2010).

Third, Xinjiang is a regional security support area. Its location, which borders directly with various countries, in addition to bringing in advantages, it is not impossible that it can even threaten the

security of China's territorial integrity, so if it is not handled immediately it will have an impact on the stability of domestic security. That is why the Chinese government is worried that if any turmoil arising from the Uyghur ethnicity is left alone, let alone succeed in liberating themselves, it will have an impact on interests, security, and trigger other autonomous regions to do the same.

Fourth, ethnic diversity in Xinjiang. The reality shows that Xinjiang is also home to several other ethnicities besides the Uyghurs. There are also Han, Hui, Kazakh and other ethnic groups living side by side. This phenomenon certainly creates cultural diversity which is a valuable wealth for China.

C.3. Uyghur Attitudes

There are about 10 million Uyghurs living in Xinjiang. The rest are a mixture of other ethnicities, especially the Han ethnicity, which reaches around 8 million people. Xinjiang itself is designated as an autonomous province/region by the Chinese central government. However, it is common knowledge that there have been tensions between the central government and the ethnic Uyghurs. This tension has even come to the attention of other countries, including the United Nations (UN). The Uyghurs themselves, in relation to Xinjiang, have the following views and attitudes.

Firstly, the Uyghurs are distinctly different from the rest of China in terms of origin, stature and religion. Therefore, some Uyghurs believe that they have the right to maintain and promote their cultural identity independently of the Chinese central government. Uyghurs have strong emotional ties to Xinjiang, believing it to be the place of origin of their ancestors and home to Uyghur cultural and historical heritage. This creates and instils a deep sense of identity and attachment of ethnic Uyghurs to Xinjiang.

Secondly, the inequality of attention and economic inequality received by the Uyghur ethnic group compared to the central government's attention to other ethnic groups or even the assumption that they do not get benefits comparable to the exploitation of natural resources in the Xinjiang region which is their own hometown. This is reinforced by the strong and excessive control of the central government in both the political and economic spheres, which hinders their economic progress and welfare.

Third, the government's strict restrictions on religious practices fuelled discontent and a desire to protect their religious identity. It is possible that in the name of human rights this attitude will increase and lead to the emergence of a desire to secede and establish a state based on Islamic religious principles. The 1930s-1940s saw several conflicts, and this tragedy even led to the creation of the state of East Turkestan, although it only lasted one year.

Only because it was successfully overthrown by Hui Muslims who were subservient and loyal to Mao Tse Tung.

Conclusion

Xinjiang is currently a controversial and highly complex region. Views and interpretations can vary widely, depending on the political perspective, culture, and sources of information used. On the one hand, the Chinese Government states that the measures taken in Xinjiang are to address issues of extremism, terrorism, and maintain social and economic stability in the region. They emphasise economic development efforts and infrastructure projects in Xinjiang as part of a regional development strategy.

While in some views, especially for Uyghurs who are the original ethnic group in the region, the Chinese government has acted unfairly because on the one hand the Xinjiang region is maintained as an autonomous region of the Chinese government which cannot be released to other parties for an inch, but

on the other hand many attitudes and actions of the Chinese government show injustice, discrimination and even tend to violate human rights which of course trigger resistance from the Uyghur ethnic group.

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