

Boundaries, Discrimination, and Interethnic Conflict in Xinjiang, China

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Boundaries, Discrimination, and Interethnic Conflict in Xinjiang, China

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The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region has been afflicted by Uighur political activism and ethnic violence for the past few decades. Interethnic relations between the Uighurs and Han Chinese have been extremely tense. Why is Xinjiang so vulnerable to interethnic violence? Why are intergroup dynamics between the Uighurs and Han Chinese so volatile? This paper examines Uighur–Han Chinese relations in contemporary Xinjiang and probes conditions that facilitate interethnic violence. Utilizing Fredrik Barth’s approach to ethnicity that emphasizes boundaries, this paper examines in detail how the rigid interethnic boundary between the Uighurs and Han Chinese has been constructed and strengthened in Xinjiang. Perceived differences have generated mutual distrust and discrimination between the two groups that make intergroup communication and understanding difficult and therefore very limited. In situations such as that in Xinjiang, where a rigid intergroup boundary is in place and civic engagements across groups are lacking, intergroup conflict is extremely hard to avoid.

On July 5, 2009, one of the deadliest riots in China in recent years erupted in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.¹ On that day, ethnic Uighur demonstrators clashed with police forces and violently attacked innocent Han Chinese passersby, which led to the deaths of around two hundred people.² This incident brought the Uighur issue and China’s ethnic politics into the international media spotlight; it also led to severe repression by the Chinese state against the Uighur people and caused an information lockdown on the whole Xinjiang region for almost a year. Xinjiang is perhaps the region where interethnic relations are the tensest in all of China. Sporadic riots and ethnic violence have occurred during the past few decades, as well as armed uprisings, bombings, and assassinations.

According to some scholars, Xinjiang is heading toward “Palestinization,” in imminent danger of devolving into protracted ethnic conflict and communal violence (Wang 2007).

This paper looks at two processes that generated the rigid intergroup boundary between the Han Chinese and the Uighurs. First, large scale in-migration of Han Chinese to Xinjiang during the past few decades has brought the Uighurs into direct contact and confrontation with the Han Chinese in daily life. These intensified encounters between the two have highlighted existing linguistic, cultural, and religious differences between the two, resulting in self-imposed segregation between the two groups in Xinjiang,

¹ Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), or East Turkestan as it is called by Uighur nationalists, covers a vast territory in the northwest part of China with a total area of 1,664,900 square km. It comprises one-sixth of China’s total geographic territory and is the size of Britain, France, Germany, and Spain combined (Millward 2007, 4). Xinjiang is traditionally home to various Turkic-speaking and Persian-speaking Muslim oasis dwellers, as

well as Turkic-speaking and Mongolian-speaking nomads who roam the grasslands in the north. There is no standard nomenclature for the Uighurs and East Turkestan: Uighur is sometimes spelled as Uyghur or Uyghur; East Turkestan sometimes is known as Eastern Turkestan or Eastern Turkistan. In this paper, I use Uighur and East Turkestan unless in direct quotation.

² For a balanced account of the riot, see Millward (2010).

especially in urban areas. To illustrate the development and manifestation of this segregation, a detailed analysis of how the two communities develop their stereotypes and prejudices against each other in daily life is provided. Issues such as language use in the job market, language education, and religious and dietary differences are explored. The second process is the contribution of preferential policies, discriminatory measures in the job market, political repression by the Chinese government, and intergroup violence to the elimination of intragroup differences within the various Uighur communities in Xinjiang. These factors have helped generate a rigid intergroup boundary, which engenders rampant distrust and discrimination between the two groups and makes the intergroup dynamic extremely susceptible to violence.

This analysis of the Xinjiang case aims to make the following contributions: foremost, by utilizing Barth's concept of boundaries, it provides a detailed portrayal of a rigid intergroup relationship at the meso level. It thus offers a glimpse into the mechanisms of how rigid interethnic boundaries are constructed and maintained. In addition, by linking rigid group boundaries and mutual distrust and discrimination, it provides an understanding of how the lack of civic engagements across groups makes violence between them possible and likely. In conclusion, this paper calls for more attention to the social processes of intergroup relations and their impact on communal violence.³

Using ethnographic methods, this paper is based on interviews conducted and observations recorded during a field trip to Xinjiang in 2008. The richness of such materials allows readers to gain a vivid understanding of Xinjiang's ethnic problems at the meso level. Materials collected through ethnographic methods are, of course, filtered through the subjective perceptions and opinions of the researcher (Schensul et al. 1999, 273). In this case, the materials are further cross-checked and juxtaposed with existing writings on Xinjiang so as to present a more balanced portrayal of its interethnic dynamics. Yet there are significant limita-

tions to the theoretical conclusions that can be drawn from a single case study. At best, the analysis presented here is an "interpretive case study," whereby "generalization is applied to a specific case with the aim of throwing light on the case rather than of improving the generalization in any way" (Lijphart 1971, 692). Through an engagement with Barth's theoretical framework, it is possible to interpret and probe how rigid group boundaries come into existence and how they manifest in daily life in Xinjiang. However, since it is a single case study, readers should treat this analysis of Xinjiang's interethnic relations as only one interpretation.

My analysis starts with a brief review of the history of Xinjiang and the background of ethnic politics in the region. It discusses the current situation in Xinjiang, and, in particular, the occasional outbursts of violent confrontation between the Uighurs and Han Chinese since the 1990s. Following that, the paper introduces Barth's concept of group boundaries, and shows how it is useful for understanding rigid intergroup boundaries in places such as Xinjiang. Using this theory as a guide, I go on to portray the interethnic dynamic in Xinjiang, and to offer an analysis of how intergroup boundaries are constructed and maintained in daily life. The paper then reflects on the implications of rigid intergroup boundaries, and how they feed mutual distrust and discrimination, which potentially breed violence. My concluding remarks concern ethnic violence in general and policy recommendations for Xinjiang in particular.

1. Recent Incidents of Violence in Xinjiang

Located along the Silk Roads linking ancient China to Europe, Xinjiang has historically been a nexus where the East meets the West. China-based dynastic control over Xinjiang should be considered sporadic, corresponding to the ebb and flow of imperial powers. It was the Manchu Qing Dynasty that finally conquered the Zungar Mongols and absorbed Xinjiang into its imperial domain. In 1884, Xinjiang was officially declared a province. After the collapse of the Qing Empire in 1911, Xinjiang was immediately taken over by various warlords (Forbes 1986). Xinjiang

³ Social Identity Theory uses a psychological approach to address why groups engage in in-group privilege and out-group prejudice. This paper instead

puts the focus squarely on the social processes of the construction and maintenance of ethnic boundaries.

witnessed two short-lived independent governments in the 1930s and 1940s. The first, a Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan, was established in 1933 by Muhammad Amin Bughra (Mehmet Emin Bugra), a prominent Muslim scholar, together with his two younger brothers Abdullah and Nur Ahmad (Forbes 1986, 113). This is considered to be the first East Turkestan Republic (ETR) by many Uighur nationalists today. The regime came to an end in 1934. In the fall of 1944, a rebellion broke out in Ili in northern Xinjiang. This rebellion, backed by the Soviet Union, established the second East Turkestan Republic (Benson 1990; Wang 1999). This ETR was absorbed by the newly independent People's Republic of China, under the pressure of the Soviet Union (Millward and Tursun 2004). In 1955, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region was established, with the Uighurs designated as the titular nationality. Seypidin Ezizi, a Uighur, served as the chairman of XUAR's People's Council. Wang Enmao, a Han general, nevertheless held the top post in the regional military and Chinese Communist Party. This pattern of leadership composition still persists today, with a Uighur as chairman of the XUAR but the real power held by a Han Chinese as the CCP boss.

After the great exodus of ethnic Uighur and Kazakhs into the Soviet Union in 1962, in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet split and the subsequent closing of borders, little is known about whether any major political mobilization by the Uighurs occurred during the Cultural Revolution years. Partly due to the turbulent and repressive nature of the Chinese state during these years and partly due to the shutting off of Xinjiang from external influences, Uighur opposition to Chinese rule gradually became more overtly nationalistic during the 1980s (Dillon 2004, 59). However, political activism in Xinjiang during the 1980s was quite sporadic and often limited in scale. It was in the 1990s that political movements, which often resorted to violence, gradually spread throughout the region (Dillon 2004). This outbreak of violence began with the Baren Incident in southern Xinjiang. A rebel group, led by Zeydin Yusuf, with the name Islamic Party of East Turkistan planned a series of synchro-

nized attacks on government buildings (Millward 2004, 14). According to some reports, hundreds of people were killed in clashes with the Chinese police force. The scale of the rebellion notwithstanding, rebels during the Baren Incident also seem to have propagated separatist ideologies and organized the rebellion through the channels of local mosques (Dillon 2004, 73). After the Baren Incident, the political activities of Uighur separatists became increasingly violent. The 1990s were a decade of bombings and assassinations throughout Xinjiang. Targets were usually Uighur government officials and cooperative religious clerics, who were considered to be traitors by radical Uighur separatists (Millward 2007, 330). Between 1990 and 1999, according to one estimate, 61 violent incidents occurred in Xinjiang.⁴

One large-scale and deadly riot took place in the city of Yining (Ghulja) in early 1997. Following the Strike Hard Campaign in 1996, which targeted illegal religious activities and private Quranic schools, local police in the city of Yining arrested two Uighur religious students around the time of Ramadan. Several hundred people demonstrated in response, eventually leading to a riot. The Chinese government official figure for casualties of the riot was 198 injured and 7 dead, while Uighur exiles claimed up to 300 dead (Dillon 2004, 93–94).

Since the Yining (Ghulja) Incident in 1997 and up until very recently, there have been no large-scale political mobilizations reported in Xinjiang beyond a few sporadic bombings, assassinations, and small-scale protests. Yet, on July 5, 2009, Xinjiang witnessed a large-scale riot in the capital city of Urumqi with a surprisingly high number of casualties. On that day, hundreds of Uighurs in Urumqi went to protest the death of two Uighur workers in a factory in Southern China, and the demonstration soon turned into a deadly riot. Perhaps frustrated with police forces that tried to stop the demonstration, many protestors violently attacked innocent civilians, specifically targeting Han Chinese. According to official statistics, a total of 197 people died as a result of the riot, the majority of them Han Chinese.⁵ Thousands of troops

⁴ See the dataset compiled in Hierman (2007).

⁵ See the report in Xinhua News, accessible at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/18/content_11727782.htm.

were immediately brought in to impose order through mass arrests. Two days later, frustrated and angered by the loss of so many Han Chinese lives, thousands of Han Chinese vigilantes marched in Urumqi, armed with sticks and iron bars, ready to fight back at the Uighurs (Millward 2010, 354). The relationship between the two groups has become extremely tense, threatening the future peace and stability of Xinjiang.

2. Boundary and Ethnic Identity Construction

To make sense of the violent mobilization of the Uighurs in the past few decades, a few questions need to be addressed: (1) Why is Xinjiang so vulnerable to interethnic violence? (2) Why are intergroup dynamics between the Uighurs and Han Chinese so volatile? and (3) How is violence justified and used as a means to address grievances? Here we need to look at how the rigid intergroup boundary between the Uighurs and the Han Chinese is constructed and maintained in everyday life in Xinjiang. That rigid boundary makes intergroup communications between the two groups difficult, leading to mistrust and discrimination. Lack of civic engagement across groups creates conditions that allow indiscriminate interethnic violence. To understand how rigid the intergroup boundary is in Xinjiang and the conditions that made its development possible, we will engage Fredrik Barth's thesis on ethnic boundary construction through social encountering.

Barth's conceptualization of ethnicity emphasizes that it is the ethnic boundary that defines a group, rather than inherent cultural attributes (Barth 1969, 15). While the cultural content or even membership of an ethnic group can change, it is still important to explore how group boundaries are maintained in different contexts. Barth asserts that "categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories" (Barth 1969, 9–10). He is cautioning scholars not to take group differences or conflict for granted; rather, they need to explore empirically how group boundaries are demarcated.

Group boundaries are constructed in two ways. One is through intragroup ascription, and the other is through ex-

ternal designation. Each individual carries certain identity attributes that he or she can draw upon to identify with a certain group. At the same time, the manifestation of the meaning of these attributes depends upon the situational context. In some instances the attribute might be language, in others it might be religion, race, physical differences, customs, or behavior, and so on. Thus, within different situations and with different audiences, one can draw upon certain attributes either to identify with or distance oneself from a group. We can think of each individual as carrying a portfolio of identifiers, or a layering of identifications; "as audiences change, the socially-defined array of ethnic choices open to the individual changes" (Nagel 1994, 154). This is not to say that individuals have total freedom in which group they identify with. There are certain limits in one's identity repertoire. As Kanchan Chandra and Steven Wilkinson point out, all individuals have a repertoire of nominal ethnic identity attributes, which "consist of all the meaningful membership rules that can be fashioned from an individual's given set of descent-based attributes" (Chandra and Wilkinson 2008, 520). Since every individual has a certain set of attributes, the choices are not totally free or random. One's ability to engage a certain level of identity repertoire is deeply shaped and constrained by external mechanisms such as social encountering and categorization.

Social encountering plays a pivotal role. Barth especially emphasizes the interaction aspect of group boundary construction. He states that "ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundation on which embracing social systems are built" (Barth 1969, 10). Group boundaries are demarcated only when group members encounter others: during this encounter process group members realize how similar to or how different they are from the people with whom they interact. The external aspect is vital for group boundary construction. Oftentimes, it is the other that defines the self.

External categorization is particularly powerful in rigidifying group boundaries. The power and authority relationship in the categorization of groups leads to the production and reproduction of group identities (Jenkins 1994, 197). Or as

Andreas Wimmer (2008) asserts, external constraints from the structures of the social field, such as institutions, political power, and networks of political alliances, influence how group boundaries are drawn. Political institutions, in particular the modern nation-state, play an extremely powerful role in the construction of ethnic identity by imposing classification and categorization so as to demarcate group boundaries (Laitin 1986; Suny 1993). Thus, various nation-building efforts carried out by modern nation-states are in fact a process of eliminating internal boundaries while creating or maintaining external boundaries (Conversi 1999, 564). Preferential treatments of ethnic groups can also create new boundaries or strengthen existing ones (Nagel 1994, 157). Furthermore, violence can be provoked so as to strengthen the boundaries between the in-group and the out-group (Conversi 1995, 81).

To explain the making and maintenance of intergroup boundaries in a specific context, we need to pay attention to the multiple factors outlined above. First is a detailed analysis of how social encountering and external categorization have generated a rigid boundary between the Uighurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang.

3. Interethnic Boundary Construction and Maintenance

As a frontier region bordering Central Asia, Xinjiang is home to thirteen ethnic groups – the Uighur, Han, Kazak, Hui, Kirghiz, Mongol, Xibe, Russian, Tajik, Uzbek, Tatar, Manchu, and Daur. Of these, the Uighurs are the most numerous, with a population of 9.65 million; Han Chinese come in a close second, at 8.24 million; Kazakh third, at 1.48 million; Hui at 0.94 million; Kirghiz and Mongols at 0.18 million each; with the rest relatively small in number (Table 1). Population distribution of ethnic groups roughly follows north-south and urban-rural divides. Han Chinese are concentrated in urban areas and in the northern part of Xinjiang, while Uighurs are mostly concentrated in southern rural areas. For example, in the capital city of Urumqi, Han Chinese are now about 73 percent of the total population, while Uighurs are about 12 percent. However, in the south in areas such as Kashgar and Khotan, Uighurs make up more than 90 percent of the local population (Table 2).

Table 1: Ethnic groups in Xinjiang and their population (2007)

Ethnic group	Population
Uighur	9,650,629
Han	8,239,245
Kazakh	1,483,883
Hui	942,956
Kirghiz	181,862
Mongol	177,120
Tajik	44,824
Xibe	42,444
Manchu	25,626
Uzbek	16,138
Russian	11,609
Daur	6,678
Tatar	4,728
Total	20,951,900

Data from Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2008, accessible at China Data Online (<http://china-dataonline.org>).

Table 2: Uighur/Han distribution in Xinjiang (percentage)

	Uighur	Han Chinese	Other
Urumqi City	12.3	73	14.7
Karamay City	15.2	75.5	9.3
Turpan	70.5	23	6.5
Kumul (Hami)	20.2	66.7	13.1
Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture	4.6	74.4	21.1
Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture	16.2	43.8	40
Bortala Mongol Autonomous Prefecture	12.7	67.3	20
Bayangol Mongol Autonomous Prefecture	32.7	57.5	9.8
Aksu	78	20.7	1.3
Kizilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture	63.5	7.4	29.1
Kashgar	91.1	7.3	1.6
Khotan	96.5	3.5	0.2
Total	46.1	39.3	14.6

Data from Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2008, accessible at China Data Online (<http://china-dataonline.org>).

Anyone who has travelled or lived in Xinjiang would not have failed to notice the social distance between the Uighurs and Han Chinese. The most striking characteristic of their interethnic group relations is the clearly demarcated boundary between the two groups in social spaces. One can even talk about self-imposed segregation of the two groups, especially in urban areas where the two groups come into direct contact. Very rarely do Uighurs and Han Chinese socialize with each other in Xinjiang, unless it is absolutely unavoidable, such as in workplaces, schools, or other public spaces. In people's private lives, interactions between the two groups are minimal. From interviews and observations, the strong social divisions between the two groups can be identified as mainly occurring in the areas of food, marriage, residence, time zones, and language use.

As a significant ascriptive marker, religion is often associated with divisions among people in various societies. In Xinjiang's case, religious differences between the two groups are often emphasized as a key divider. The overwhelming majority of Uighurs are Muslims, and even less devout Uighurs observe a relatively strict *halal* diet. Pork, which is forbidden in the *halal* diet, is a staple food of the Han Chinese. It is commonly asserted that for this reason it is impossible for Uighurs to visit Han Chinese households, let alone for them to dine together. When I asked people why the Uighurs and Han Chinese do not socialize, often people would cite dietary differences. Restaurants in Xinjiang are distinguished by their *halal* status. Although Han Chinese occasionally dine in *halal* restaurants, Uighurs would never patronize non-*halal* ones. Some Uighurs even avoid patronizing non-Uighur-operated *halal* restaurants because of suspicions that Han Chinese might be involved in their operation and thus the establishments may not maintain appropriate standards. For Han Chinese, whose cultural expressions and socialization often center on eating and drinking, these dietary customs make it hard to make friends with the Uighurs. In return the Uighurs often emphasize being Muslim as a precondition for friendship.⁶ Islam, together with its dietary connotations, is thus at

the core of everyday interaction between the two groups (Cesaro 2000, 227). It might be the case in North America or Europe that Muslims and non-Muslims are able to socialize while retaining their *halal* food restrictions. Yet, in Xinjiang, the polemics around food consumption reinforce the strict interethnic boundary between Uighurs and Han Chinese (Cesaro 2000, 225).

Religious differences between the two groups also mean that intermarriage between Han Chinese and Uighurs is almost nonexistent. Local stories indicate that a Uighur marrying a Han Chinese would be disowned by his or her family, and would constantly be harassed and scolded within the Uighur community. During the field trip in Xinjiang, I asked a Uighur man in his early twenties whether he would ever marry a Han Chinese and he abruptly said "No." I asked him why and he said it is just impossible – the cultural differences between the two are just too vast, and his parents would never allow it to happen. Joanne Smith similarly comments that "other than religio-cultural differences per se, it is the threat of disapproval from within the Uighur community that rules out intermarriage at present" (Smith 2002, 163). Similar constraints on intermarriage also exist in the Han Chinese community. This marital preference is not unique to Xinjiang, but it is worth noting as a significant barrier to social integration.

There is also spatial and even temporal segregation between the two groups. During the time when China had a centrally planned economy, housing was often provided and allocated through the work unit. This housing policy allowed some intermixing between Han Chinese and Uighurs in residential complexes. However, since the dismantling of the planned economy in the 1980s, mixing in residential complexes quickly disappeared. With the privatization of the urban housing market, residential areas have become increasingly segregated along ethnic lines. In Urumqi, for example, most of the Uighurs are concentrated in the Erdaoqiao district in the south of the city. In other oasis cities, Uighurs are usually concentrated in the "old town," while

⁶ During my field research, I was told more than once by Uighurs that being Muslim is a very important foundation for friendship.

For a discussion of the pervasive influence of Islam on Uighur society from an anthropological perspective, see Dautcher (2009).

Han Chinese live in the “new town,” often constructed on unsettled land adjacent to the old town. Although some Uighurs might live in Han residential areas because the facilities are better, the overall pattern of residential segregation is clear. Furthermore, even in residential areas shared by both groups, children are often discouraged from playing with those from the other group (Bellér-Hann 2002, 65).

The other sign of the clear boundary between the two groups is the different time zones they inhabit in Xinjiang. Because of its distance from the Chinese capital, Xinjiang is two time zones behind Beijing. However, the unity-obsessed Chinese government officially operates on only one time zone for all of China. Thus, for example, 8:00 a.m. in Beijing would be 6:00 a.m. in Xinjiang. As a result, people usually push the time back by two hours, say by going to work at 10:00 instead of 8:00 Beijing time. However, in private life, the choice of time zone is clearly correlated with group identity: Uighurs tend to use the local Xinjiang time, while Han Chinese often stick to official Beijing time. Visitors recently arrived in Xinjiang sometimes find it confusing to figure out exactly what time people are talking about. When people across ethnic boundaries schedule meetings, they need to specify which time zone they are referring to. What is surprising is that many Han Chinese, as well as some Hui, stubbornly stick to the Beijing time despite its inconveniences, to show their loyalty toward the Chinese state and their separation from the Uighurs.⁷ One Han Chinese woman told me that “we have our own time, they have theirs, and we do not intermingle with each other.” And for the Uighurs, rejecting Beijing time represents a way to resist the Han Chinese and the Chinese state’s hegemony imposed on Xinjiang. To paraphrase James Scott (1987), this is one way the politically weak Uighur people express their resistance.

Linguistic barriers between the two groups are also substantial. Most Han Chinese in urban areas in Xinjiang cannot speak the Uighur language, and Uighurs from the south

such as Kashgar and Khotan can barely communicate in the Chinese language either. According to a survey carried out in Urumqi in 2000, half of the Han Chinese respondents reported that they cannot speak Uighur at all, and only 3.2 percent reported they were proficient at the language. In the same survey, 14.2 percent of Uighurs reported not being able to speak any Chinese, and fewer than half of the respondents (47.9 percent) reported they were relatively proficient at Chinese (Yee 2003, 436). In southern Xinjiang, where the Uighurs still constitute a numerical majority, some Han Chinese are able to speak the Uighur language relatively well. However, in northern Xinjiang and especially in urban areas where Han Chinese are predominant, few Han Chinese people have the incentive or interest to study the Uighur language.

Uighurs are often under pressure to conform linguistically. Because the urban job market is dominated by the use of Chinese, many younger Uighurs do have command of the language. Yet in private settings they often prefer Uighur. Uighur language skills are often used as to measure how ethnically good or pure a speaker is. In Xinjiang, people talk about two categories of Uighurs, depending on the language environment in which they are educated. *Minkaohan* refers to Uighurs who have gone through the Chinese educational system and whose Chinese language ability is usually much better than that of the *minkaomin*, who are Uighurs educated in the Uighur language. There is arguably a backlash in the Uighur community against the emergence of more and more *minkaohan* Uighurs in Xinjiang, who are more comfortable speaking Chinese than Uighur. Oftentimes these *minkaohan* are looked down upon by their *minkaomin* counterparts, who deem them culturally too similar to Han. Yet ordinary Han Chinese tend to lump the *minkaohan* and *minkaomin* together simply as Uighurs and to treat both with equal suspicion and dislike. Racial differences make it essentially impossible for a Chinese-speaking Uighur to pass as a Han Chinese. There is a satirical Uighur saying that the *minkaohan* Uighurs are the fourteenth eth-

⁷ The Hui are a Sinic-language-speaking Muslim group. Smith notes “like the Han Chinese, the Hui consider Beijing time the standard time for Xinjiang as for all regions of

China. This is probably one factor contributing to the mutual mistrust between Uighurs and Hui Muslims in Xinjiang” (Smith 2002, 161).

nic group in Xinjiang, added to the thirteen official ethnic groups (Smith Finley 2007). Thus, linguistic competence and purity are constantly emphasized within the Uighur community in order to maintain the group's distance from the Han Chinese.

The question remains as to why and how these divisions came into existence. Barth's approach to group boundaries proposes that the manifestation of one's ethnic identification is situational: social encounters are crucial in demarcating and maintaining group boundaries. This is particularly the case in Xinjiang, where multiple ethnic groups regularly interact with each other. Xinjiang is not a place where one can draw a single line between dichotomous groups. In addition to Uighurs and Han Chinese, there are also the numerous Hui, as well as the Kazakhs, a Turkic group nomadic in its traditional lifestyle. When a Uighur encounters a Hui, often the emphasis is on linguistic and racial differences despite their common Muslim faith. Hui Muslims can be greatly mistrusted and resented by the Uighurs and are often accused of being the same as the Han Chinese.⁸ When Uighurs encounter Kazakhs, by contrast, often the emphasis is on their different lifestyles, with the former being stereotyped as agricultural and the latter as nomadic. The shamanistic tradition among the Kazakhs often leads to their being considered by the Uighurs to be less authentically Muslim.

Nevertheless, the greatest difference is between Uighurs and Han Chinese, whose linguistic, religious, and cultural differences all line up together without "cross-cutting cleavages." Especially during the past few decades, Uighurs have come into direct contact and confrontation with the Han Chinese. One strategy that the Chinese government employs to solidify its control of Xinjiang is through waves of migration of Han Chinese into the region: in 1953, Han Chinese were only about 6 percent of Xinjiang's total population, but by 2000 the number had jumped to 40 percent. In the meantime, the Uighur population dwindled from 75 percent of the total in 1953 to 45 percent in 2000 (Toops

2004, 246–48). These days, Han Chinese migrant workers and peasants have started to penetrate into small towns and rural areas that were usually strongholds of the Uighurs. Such intensified encounters with the other group have made the Uighurs realize and emphasize how different they are from the Han Chinese. Those perceived differences have caused both communities consciously to keep at a distance from each other and maintain segregation.

At the same time, external categorizations have also decreased internal differences among Uighurs originating from different oases, who speak different dialects and have different cultural habits (Rudelson 1997). A more uniform identification among the Uighurs has emerged since the 1980s, superseding their previous oasis-based identities. There are several reasons for this increasing identification with the larger group beyond encounters with Han Chinese. First is the Chinese government's "preferential policies" toward minorities. Second is the role of repression and violence in hardening intergroup differences and smoothing over intragroup variations.

Starting in the 1980s, the Chinese government began to implement a set of preferential policies toward ethnic minorities. In Xinjiang, two policy areas are particularly relevant to the Uighurs: education and family planning. Linda Benson, for example, points out that in the 1990s about 50 percent of admission quotas for Xinjiang University were reserved for ethnic minority students, mainly Uighurs (Benson 2004, 208). Also, university admission scores for Uighurs who went through the Uighur language education system – *minkaomin* – are usually significantly lower than those set for Han Chinese students. On the issue of family planning, the first compulsory family planning laws went into effect in Xinjiang only in 1988, ten years later than for the rest of the country (Clark 2001, 229). According to this law, urban Uighur couples are allowed to have two children while rural ones can have three, a preferential policy deeply resented by the Han Chinese, who are subject to the "one-child" rule. This differential treatment of the

⁸ This may have historical reasons. During the Republican period, Hui troops under various warlords at times heavily repressed

the Uighurs. One might even argue that Hui Muslims played a significant role in keeping Xinjiang within China's fold (Forbes 1986).

Uighurs arguably has contributed to the strengthening of the common Uighur identification. Preferential policies can be seen to strengthen group identity elsewhere in the world (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967; De Zwart 2000), and one can certainly argue that the same process occurred among the Uighurs in Xinjiang.

The other important factors are state repression against the Uighurs and interethnic violence between Han Chinese and the Uighurs since the 1990s, which have further hardened intergroup division and strengthened intragroup solidarity. As noted earlier, the Chinese state's response to the growing political activism and radicalization of the Uighurs since the early 1980s was heavy-handed and indiscriminate repression against the Uighurs as a uniform group. At the end of April 1996, the Chinese government launched its first "Strike Hard" campaign. In Xinjiang, the goal of the campaign was not only to crack down on criminal activities in general, but also to target political dissenters and, in particular, Uighur separatists. Michael Dillon writes, "the Xinjiang party committee explicitly linked separatism with what it termed 'unlawful religious activities' and launched a campaign to reduce their effect in schools, in publishing, and throughout the region" (Dillon 2004, 85). As a result, some Uighur pro-independence organizations claimed that between April and June 1996, some four thousand religious students were arrested and sent to prison camps. There were also claims that thousands of people were arrested throughout the region during the campaign, of which the overwhelming majority were Uighur (Dillon 2004, 87–88).

More significantly, after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent U.S.-led "war on terror," the Chinese government took the opportunity to start its own anti-terrorism campaign that linked Uighur pro-independence movements and organizations with the Taliban and terrorists. In January 2002, the Chinese State Council Information Office published a document about East Turkestan terrorist forces operating in China (Becquelin 2004, 39). The result was to conflate all Uighur pro-autonomy and independence movements with existing Uighur terrorist movements, for example labeling the East Turkestan Independence Movement and the East Turkestan Islamic Party as terrorist organizations. The Chinese government effectively used the

"war on terror" discourse to brand Uighur political dissents as terrorists, justifying a wave of repression against Uighur dissidents across the region. The indiscriminate nature of this action, which treats all Uighurs as potential separatists or terrorists, has certainly served to alienate even more Uighurs, and has perhaps pushed many moderate Uighurs into the extremist camp, contributing to intragroup solidarity.

In addition to state repression of the Uighurs, intergroup violence between the Uighurs and Han Chinese has also hardened intergroup boundaries. Scholars writing on ethnic conflict have discussed at length the role of violence in strengthening group differences (Conversi 1999; Fearon and Laitin 2000). In certain cases, extremist actors may purposefully instigate violence to prevent moderates from compromising with the other group. In Xinjiang, whenever Uighurs rioted against the Chinese government, the targets of violence were often Han Chinese. In the aftermath of the 2009 Urumqi riot, one could argue that interethnic division will become even more significant, as evidenced by the retaliation of Han Chinese mobs against the Uighurs two days after the initial riot. It seems clear that the series of violent incidents since the 1990s has strengthened interethnic boundaries between the two groups and pushed the Uighur community further away from the Han Chinese community and the Chinese state.

4. Rigid Group Boundaries, Discrimination, and Violence

The rigidification of the group boundary between the Uighurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang has two broad implications. First is increased discrimination by the members of each group against the other. Although the Han Chinese are the politically and economically dominant group in China, mutual contempt and distrust between the two groups run both ways.

There are multiple forms of discrimination. One is repression of Uighur culture, language, and religion by the Chinese state. The Uighur language has been increasingly sidelined in the educational systems in Xinjiang, and efforts to increase teaching of Mandarin Chinese with the ultimate goal of achieving linguistic assimilation have been renewed (Dwyer 2005; Schluessel 2007). The Chinese government has also exerted strict control over Islam, cracking down on

“illegal religious activities” by “defrocking suspect clerics, breaking up unauthorized scripture schools (madrasa), and halting the construction of mosques” (Bovingdon 2004, 33). Uighurs also face discrimination in the urban job market. Because Han Chinese are more dominant in the private sector in urban areas, hiring favors Han Chinese or ethnic minorities who can speak the Chinese language well; many job advertisements explicitly state that only Han Chinese can apply. Thus Uighurs who have gone through the Uighur education system have a strong disadvantage in finding jobs in the private sector. As a result, the unemployment rate among Uighurs is reportedly much higher than among Han Chinese.⁹ Beyond this job discrimination, many Han Chinese also tend to think of Uighurs as backward, dirty, lazy, and ungrateful for the economic development brought to Xinjiang by the Han Chinese. In addition, oftentimes Han Chinese associate the Uighurs with criminal activities and consciously distance themselves from them (Kaltman 2007). The promotion of the discourse on “war on terror,” has led more and more Han Chinese to treat Uighurs as potential terrorists. Uighurs, for their part, do not hesitate to show disgust and contempt toward Han Chinese whenever possible. Some spit on the ground when they pass Han Chinese people. Some Uighur marketplace vendors refuse to do business with Han Chinese customers, or charge exorbitant prices when they do. This mutual discrimination is cyclical and self-reinforcing.

The second and more important implication of the rigid intergroup boundary in Xinjiang is that it makes communication across groups extremely difficult, which paves the way for eruptions of violence. In an effort to explain interethnic cooperation, James Fearon and David Laitin point out that the breakdown of intergroup peace is often due to the lack of formal or informal institutions to regulate information and prevent opportunistic individuals from taking costly actions – such as the instigation of violence (Fearon and Laitin 1996, 717–18). Social order and interethnic cooperation require institutional mechanisms to provide information across groups. Such cooperation is easier for groups that have dense intergroup networks, which “allow for

cheap and rapid transmission of information about individuals and their past history” (Fearon and Laitin 1996, 718). In contrast, in situations where intergroup social networks are less developed or simply do not exist, “cooperation and trust across groups cannot be supported by punishment strategies that condition individual behavior” (Fearon and Laitin 1996, 719). One unfortunate outcome might be that one group would indiscriminately punish all members of the other group, which would lead to the complete breakdown of intergroup peace. These insights have strong empirical implications. In his study on communal violence in India, Ashutosh Varshney points out that civic engagements between the Muslim and Hindu communities, can often make neighborhood-level peace possible by promoting communications: “prior and sustained contacts between members of different groups allow communication between them to moderate tensions and pre-empt violence” (Varshney 2002, 47). The lack of such sustained engagements across groups creates conditions for intergroup violence. In Xinjiang’s case, where the Uighurs and Han Chinese maintain such strong boundaries against each other, no meaningful civic engagement can occur.

5. Policy Recommendations

This paper has sketched the dynamics of interethnic relations between Uighurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang at the meso level. Utilizing Barth’s approach to ethnicity, I have shown how social encounters and external categorizations have permitted rigid interethnic group boundaries to be constructed and maintained in everyday life in Xinjiang. Because of this rigid boundary between the two groups, Uighurs and Han Chinese are segregated in their own social spaces without much mutual communication. Accordingly, mistrust and discrimination run rampant. Furthermore, a rigid group boundary hampers intergroup civic engagements, defeating efforts to dispel mutual distrust and discrimination and also making the intergroup dynamic extremely susceptible to violence.

This analysis of the Xinjiang case thus sheds light on the social conditions for communal violence. Of course, the

⁹ For example, see “Why the Uighurs Fear China’s Boom,” *Time*, July 14, 2009.

actual immediate causes of each incident of violent outbursts vary, from a little brawl on the street to a rumor of mistreatment and injustice committed by the other group. In the wake of these incidents, the rigid intergroup social boundary blocks opportunities and defeats efforts to lessen their impact. Scholars who are interested in discrimination, prejudice, and violence will find it worthwhile to pay attention to the social processes that create discrimination and prejudice, and to how they are perpetuated through intergroup dynamics in various social contexts.

This analysis also illuminates some policy recommendations for intergroup peace in Xinjiang. Setting aside dramatic measures such as partition or secession, one logical policy recommendation for preventing or reducing the chances for future violence in Xinjiang would be to encourage mutual communication and civic engagement.¹⁰ In addition, the Chinese government needs to rethink its current policies in Xinjiang to show more respect for Uighur culture, language, and religion, and to provide more space for cultural expressions. The government also needs to take legal action to prevent blatant discrimination against Uighurs, especially in the job market. Most importantly, as our discussion of the implications of rigid group boundar-

ies shows, serious efforts should be made to foster civic engagement across group lines at the meso level. NGOs that aim to facilitate dialogue between the Uighur and Han Chinese communities should be encouraged. In particular, civic associations that include members from both groups should be promoted (Varshney 2002, 292). Currently, most efforts from the international community are aimed at support of Uighurs' political and cultural rights in Xinjiang. These are certainly noble goals. However, if the international community has genuine humanitarian concern about preventing the future eruption of violence, it needs to invest in a civil society in Xinjiang that includes both Uighurs and Han Chinese. Educational programs that facilitate dialogue and reconciliation across group lines should be emphasized. Moderate people from each group should be identified and encouraged, with an emphasis on how to build more cross-cutting cleavages between the two groups. These are certainly no easy tasks to achieve, as the authoritarian state of China puts more constraints on the development of such civic life. However the Chinese state as well as the international community must realize that only through efforts to foster mutual communication and engagements across these two groups will peace and stability be achieved in Xinjiang.

¹⁰ For a discussion of more drastic measures to prevent interethnic violence, see Kaufmann (1996).

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