

Violence And Identity ~ The “Self” And The “Other”: An Exploration Of Ethnic Relations And Conflict In China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region



Abstract

On the night of 5 July 2009, Urumchi, the provincial capital of the *Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region* (XUAR), witnessed the worst outbreak of ethnic rioting in the history of the People’s Republic of China (Wong, 2009). According to official figures, 197 people were killed and over 2,000 injured (Xinhua, 2009a). The majority of those who died were of Han ethnicity. The Han make up over 92 per cent of the Chinese population but are in a minority in Xinjiang. Their attackers were mostly of Uyghur ethnicity, a Turkic Muslim ethnic group which is in the majority in Xinjiang. The 2009 riot was not an isolated event, but the worst in a series of sporadic outbreaks of violence in recent years. These outbreaks of violence have brought renewed focus, both within China and internationally, on the issue of ethnic relations in Xinjiang and on the Chinese government’s minority policy and have had a significant impact on the construction and maintenance of the social boundaries that exist between both groups.

Introduction

Xinjiang, which translates as “*New Dominion*” or “*New Frontier*” in English, is a vast resource-rich province twice the size of Western Europe. At just under 1.7 million square km, it makes up one sixth of the People’s Republic of China and borders Russia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. It is of enormous strategic and economic importance but remains, as it always has been, a potential tinderbox, as its peoples, old and new, struggle to find their place in an ever-shifting landscape. The central government is determined to secure control of this key region in the face of continuing

resentment from its indigenous peoples (Bovingdon, 2010).

According to the 2010 Census (Xinjiang Statistical Year Book 2009) Uyghurs make up 45.21 per cent of the population of Xinjiang, numbering 8,345,622 people. The Han make up 40.58 per cent with 7,489,919 people. Next come the Kazakhs, who number just over 1 million, followed by: Mongol; Dongxiang; Tajik; Xibe; Manchu; Tuja; Uzbek; Russian; Miao; Tibetan; Zhuang; Daur; Tatar; and Salar. The 2000 census also shows that during the 1990s, Xinjiang's Han population grew by 31.6 per cent, mostly due to inward migration. This is twice the rate of the indigenous ethnic groups (up 15.9 per cent), who supposedly benefit from more relaxed family planning policies compared to the rest of China. This influx has considerably heightened the competition between the Han and local ethnic groups for land and water resources in rural areas, and for jobs in urban areas. While the most recent census was carried out in 2010, the full figures on Xinjiang's ethnic makeup had still not been released at the time of writing. The figures that have been released show the figure for the Han was hovering around the 40 per cent mark, while the Uyghur figure has fallen significantly to 42 per cent (Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2011).

Ethnic identity (*minzu* - 民族) in China, and in Xinjiang particularly, is both clearly defined by the state and controversial. In Xinjiang, China's most ethnically diverse region and also its most restive, ethnicity has a particular resonance. This chapter conceptualizes ethnicity in Xinjiang both in terms of a classical Weberian definition of "ethnic groups" as "human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonisation or both" (Weber, 1968, p. 389) and the official Communist Party interpretation of ethnicity based on Stalin's definition of historically formed stable communities of language, territory, economic life, and psychological formation, manifested through a common culture (Stalin, 1953). It understands ethnic identity as something that is self-conscious and that this self-consciousness often has its source in the labels used by others. As Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartman (2007) argue, the identity that others assign to us can be a powerful force in shaping our own self-concepts. Essential to this exploration of Han and Uyghur identity will be the assumption that an ethnic group cannot truly exist in isolation, it has meaning only in a context that involves others.

Based on a large number of interviews carried out in Urumchi from 2009 to 2012,

this chapter is divided into two parts: part one will give a detailed account of the riots based on eye witness accounts together with contemporaneous news reports; part two seeks to examine how the violence of 2009 has affected how the Han and Uyghur see the themselves and each other and the role of social boundaries and relational comparisons in the creation and maintenance of group identities.

My research takes as a basic theoretical assumption Fredrik Barth's (1969) conceptualization of ethnicity, which emphasizes that it is the ethnic boundary that defines a group. Barth maintained that ethnic identities do not derive from intrinsic features but emerge from, and are reasserted in, encounters, transactions, and oppositions between groups. An ethnic group can only be defined and structured from within, and only these "objective" differences considered significant by the actors themselves are taken into account. He asserts that categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact, and information but do entail social processes of exclusion and inclusion. It is not so much who we are, rather, who we are not. Barth also argues that identity must be selected by groups themselves, a process he calls "self-ascription" (Barth, 1969, p.4).

Part One

Urumchi aflame: the causes and consequences of the 5 July riot

In the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the authorities expressed concern over Uyghur separatist groups potentially plotting to disrupt the games. At the beginning of 2008, it claimed to have broken up a number of plots and to have found equipment used in the making of explosives as well as four kilograms of yellow sulphur and 100 kilograms of nine other types of chemicals, along with computer equipment and disks containing "holy war" materials. Police claimed the suspects were planning to attack the Olympics as well as other government targets in Beijing and Shanghai (Hastings, 2011). In March, the authorities announced they had thwarted an attempt by Xinjiang "terrorists" to hijack a Beijing-bound passenger airplane and crash it. However, despite its heightened security operation in Xinjiang, two violent incidents in Xinjiang did overshadow the opening of the Olympics.

On 4 August, just days before the games were due to open, two men armed with knives and explosives ambushed military police who were exercising outside their station in Kashgar. State media reported that the attackers had killed 16 officers and wounded 16 others. Days later on 9 August, 12 explosive devices

were detonated in attacks on at least four local government buildings, a supermarket, and hotels in the city of Kucha, killing a security guard and at least 10 of the suspected attackers (Jacobs, 2008; Yardley, 2008).

The riots which erupted in Urumchi on a hot summer's evening in early July 2009 were the worst outbreak of social unrest in China since the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 (Wong, 2009) and would have wide ranging repercussions. Beijing had clearly anticipated trouble in the highly sensitive year of 2009 and had already moved an estimated 80,000 troops and People's Armed Police (PAP) officers to Tibet and Xinjiang ahead of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the 50th anniversary of the failed Tibetan Insurrection in 1959, and the 20th anniversary of the 1989 student protests in Beijing (Lam, 2009). China had been deeply embarrassed by the violence before and during the Olympics and was determined that it would not happen again in such a sensitive year. Yet it seems that despite the security presence local and national leadership were taken completely by surprise by the riots and left reeling as they struggled to regain control of the streets in the days that followed.

The official China Daily newspaper went so far as to describe the violence as the "deadliest riot since new China was founded" (Xiao, 2009). According to official figures, the riots, which broke out in a number of areas in the city of 2.3 million people, left 197 people dead and over 1,700 injured (Ansfield and Wong, 2009). As the crisis deepened, President Hu Jintao was forced to return to China from the G8 summit being held in Italy. While most of the fatalities occurred on the night of 5 July, it took three days and the deployment of thousands of PAP and regular soldiers onto the streets of Urumchi before the situation was brought under control (Branigan, 2009a).

Fight at the early light toy factory

According to eyewitnesses this writer spoke to on a visit to Urumchi in November 2009, the violence was triggered when police attempted to disperse a large crowd which had gathered in People's Square to protest what they saw as the inadequate handling of a violent row that had broken out thousands of miles away in a toy factory in Shaoguan City, Guangdong. The mass, late night brawl at the "Early Light" factory, involving up to 1,000 local Han Chinese and Uyghur workers who had recently been recruited from Xinjiang, led to two deaths and 118 injuries. According to an official investigation, the fight was triggered by a disgruntled former employee of the factory who had falsely written on the

internet of a young Han Chinese girl being raped by a group of Uyghurs after she mistakenly walked into a Uyghur dormitory (Reuters, 2009a).

Rumours of much greater loss of life spread quickly through the internet following the brawl on 25 June, along with gruesome pictures from Shaoguan that appeared to show more fatalities than the two reported. According to eyewitnesses interviewed during the course of my research, the original People's Square protest mostly involved students from Xinjiang University. The students had asked permission to hold a protest in the square but the authorities refused. However, those behind the protest decided to go to the square anyway and a crowd numbering in the region of 300-400 gathered, calling for a proper investigation into the events in Shaoguan. Police attempted to disperse what was at this stage a peaceful protest and, after a number of small-scale skirmishes, the crowd seemed to disperse. According to a number of eyewitnesses [i] many in the crowd were angered by what they saw as the heavy-handed approach of police. By 8pm, a larger and more violent crowd had gathered at the Uyghur bazaar in Erdaoqiao. The Erdaoqiao bazaar had once been the largest and most important Uyghur bazaar in Urumchi but has in recent years seen a large influx of Han traders and stall owners. It appears that this crowd began hurling bottles and stones at the small number of regular police who, being outnumbered, quickly withdrew. For the next four hours the city descended into total chaos with mobs of mostly young Uyghur men attacking first Han store owners and then passers-by, taxi drivers and bus drivers, while the police awaited reinforcements and orders on what to do.

By midnight, with the trouble spreading to a number of areas in the city, gunshots could be heard and paramilitary People's Armed Police officers in their distinctive green uniforms were on the streets attempting to restore order. In the early hours of the morning, along with the PAP spread out into residential areas, detaining large numbers of Uyghur men. In the region of 1,500 mostly men and boys were detained in the raids, which took place largely in the Erdaoqiao and Saimachang areas of the city (personal interviews; Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Following the riot, XUAR Chairman Nur Bekri admitted that security forces had shot dead 12 Uyghur rioters but insisted police had exercised "the greatest restraint", "In any country ruled by law, the use of force is necessary to protect the interest of the people and stop violent crime. This is the duty of policemen", Bekri told a group of foreign and Chinese journalists on 17 July 2009 (Branigan,

2009b).

On the night of 5 July, internet access was cut in Urumchi while all text messages and calls from abroad were blocked. In the days that followed, these restrictions were extended to the rest of the XUAR while social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter and video-sharing site YouTube were blocked throughout China and have remained so. The internet remained blocked throughout all of Xinjiang until May of the following year. No official figures are available for the damage this did to Xinjiang's economy but as a largely trade and export focused economy it must have been hugely significant. One Han exporter of tomatoes based in Korla told me how he was forced to take the train to Jiayuguan in Gansu, the nearest place he could access the internet, a journey of between 23 and 27 hours, just to check emails from his European customers.

Over the next two days crowds of Han Chinese, many carrying homemade weapons, began massing in various parts of the XUAR's cities, demanding revenge and in some cases attacking Uyghurs (Sommerville, 2009). According to the Xinhua news agency, on 6 July, "several thousand protesters, mostly Han Chinese, marched along Youhao Street and Guangming Street toward Erdaoqiao. The protesters held clubs, knives, axes, hammers, and various types of tools that could be used as weapons, and shouted "protect our home, protect our family members" (Xinhua, 2009a). A further 3,000 Han protestors gathered in the Jiexin Garden area. In a televised speech on the evening of 6 July, Xinjiang Party Secretary Wang Lequan announced that the city was now under night-time curfew. He told viewers the unrest had been quelled but warned that "this struggle is far from over". Earlier the same day, Urumchi party chief Li Zhi, who would be sacked a few weeks after the riot, was forced to address a large crowd from the roof of a police jeep, calling for the protestors to return home.

By this stage foreign media had arrived in large numbers and were met with an openness that surprised many, especially in the light of the restrictions placed on travelling to Tibet following the Lhasa riots in March 2008. "Let the facts speak for themselves," a regional government official, Li Wanhui, told foreign journalists (BBC Online, 2009a). Reporters arriving in Urumqi were offered official trips to the hospital and to the parts of the city worst affected by the violence accompanied by minders, but other than that they were free to move around the city as they wished.

Rebiya Kadeer and the World Uyghur Congress

It was only on 8 July, following President Hu's early return to China from a G8 summit he was attending in Italy, that large numbers of security forces (some sources put the figure as high as 50,000) began to flood the city (Lam, 2009). By 9 July, with the situation now relatively calm, helicopters dropped leaflets while trucks drove through the streets blaring messages appealing for calm and blaming extremists for orchestrating the riots. By this stage the authorities were pointing the finger of blame squarely at Rebiya Kadeer, the 62-year-old head of the World Uyghur Congress. In 1999, Kadeer was jailed by the Chinese for the crime of passing state secrets, although it appears these "secrets" were contained in newspaper clippings she sent to her husband in America (Bovingdon, 2010). Following her release in 2005, she fled to America where she set up the Uyghur American Association. Before her imprisonment, Kadeer was a successful businesswoman and philanthropist and had been held up by the Communist Party as proof of the success of its ethnic minority policy, and was even named a delegate to the eighth session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress. However, she fell from favour when she began criticizing government policy in Xinjiang. She has continuously denied being behind the riots and insists that almost 200 Uyghurs were tortured and killed at detention centres in the immediate aftermath of the riots while up to 10,000 were detained (AFP, 2009a).

An article in the *China Daily* on 7 July announced that the regional government now had "solid evidence" that Kadeer was behind the violence. According to the article, Xinjiang police had obtained recordings of calls between overseas "Eastern Turkestan" groups and accomplices inside the country. In the recorded calls, Kadeer reportedly said: "Something will happen in Urumchi". The authorities claimed the World Uyghur Congress had held a meeting on 1 July during which they "plotted to instigate unrest by sending messages via the internet, telephones and mobile phones" (Xiao, 2009). A further report says that according to recordings of calls, at 11 a.m. on 5 July, Kadeer called her younger brother in Urumchi and said, "a lot of things have happened, and we all know something might happen in Urumchi tomorrow night". The report goes on to say that on 6 July, Kadeer held an emergency meeting with some senior members of the congress to make plans to further organize both domestic and overseas demonstrations and to call for intervention from foreign governments and human rights institutions (Xinhua, 2009a).

Whether or not she had any involvement in orchestrating or foreknowledge of the riots, the events of July certainly catapulted Kadeer from relative obscurity to international recognition. She has travelled widely since then, gaining significant media attention wherever she goes. In as much as a Uyghur independence movement exists, it has never had a recognized and accepted figurehead. The Chinese government has now ensured that Kadeer has become that figurehead, for Western newspapers at least, if not among Uyghurs themselves. In August 2009, two of her children and her brother wrote open letters condemning her for orchestrating the riots. Five of Kadeer's 11 children still live in Xinjiang. Her brother Mehmet, son Khahar, who is currently in prison convicted of fraud, and her daughter Roxingul have all appeared on state television condemning her (Branigan, 2009c).

Emergency meeting of the Standing Committee of the Politburo

On the evening of 9 July 2009, Hu Jintao convened an emergency meeting of the Standing Committee of the Politburo to discuss the on-going problems in the XUAR. Standing Committee members agreed that stability in Xinjiang was the "most important and pressing task", according to a statement issued to Xinhua. The Standing Committee ordered authorities in Xinjiang to "isolate and crack down on the tiny few" and "unify and educate the majority of masses", while "instigators, organizers, culprits and violent criminals in the unrest shall be severely punished in accordance with the law", it said. "Those taking part in the riot due to provocation and deceit by separatists, should be given education". "It was a serious crime, which was masterminded and organized by the "three forces" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism at home and abroad and had resulted in great losses and done great harm to local order and stability", the statement said (Xinhua,2009c).

At the meeting it was also decided that the Standing Committee member in charge of security and law enforcement, Zhou Yongkang, would travel immediately to Urumchi to take personal charge of the security operation. According to a high-ranking XUAR official.[ii] Beijing believed the local government had been too cautious in its use of force during the protests. While President Hu, no stranger to ethnic unrest from his time as Tibet Party Secretary, insisted from Italy on the night of 5 July, as soon as the gravity of the situation became apparent, that armed police use full force, Xinjiang Party Secretary Wang Lequan was reluctant to order troops to open fire. While this may go against

Wang's hawkish reputation, there was clearly a breakdown in command on the night and despite having troops available, it took hours to bring the situation under control. A rumour quickly spread that Wang, who was disliked by all sides in Xinjiang, was too drunk on the evening to take charge. The fact that the central government changed the law on how the PAP operates within weeks of the riot suggests the central government was unhappy with the control structures in place at the time of the riot. The new law designated the PAP as responsible for dealing with "riots, unrest, large-scale violent crimes, and terrorist attacks" and crucially included new procedures for deploying PAP troops, drawn up by the State Council and the Central Military Commission, which took much of the control given to the PAP away from local officials (AP, 2009; O'Brien, 2011).

Three weeks after the riot, with the situation on the ground stabilizing, Nur Berkri set out the government line. "The riot is neither an ethnic nor religious issue, let alone a human rights issue. It is a political struggle between us and hostile forces on safeguarding national unity, opposing ethnic division, maintaining the socialist system, consolidating the Party's ruling status and protecting core national interests", he told a meeting of the XUAR legislature. He also pledged to find and arrest "at an early date" all other suspects who had escaped "after committing crimes of vandalizing, looting and arson during the riot" [Xinhua, 200b). A month later Hu Jintao visited Xinjiang, where he told government officials: "the key to our work in Xinjiang is to properly handle the relationship between development and stability in the region", emphasizing the "three unshakeable goals" of upholding the "central task of economic construction", "maintaining 'social stability and combating separatism'", and upholding unity among the country's different ethnic groups to ensure "joint prosperity and development" (Ansfield and Wong, 2009; Lam, 2009).

The visit of Hu had intended to show that stability had returned to Xinjiang but the authorities were deeply embarrassed in September when a bizarre panic over syringe attacks broke out in Urumchi and then spread to other cities. The vast majority of these cases, however, seemed to have been imagined and the result of a hysteria that had gripped the region since 5 July. According to officials, nearly 600 people reported being pricked with needles in Urumchi, but only 106 victims showed signs of jabs, bumps, or rashes, while the others had been injured by sewing needles or pins rather than syringes, and a few had been bitten by insect. None of the reported victims suffered from illness, poisoning, or other reactions

[Coonan, 2009).

The situation deteriorated further on Friday, 4 September, when a large crowd of mostly Han protestors gathered in People's Square to demand that the government improve the security situation. Wang Lequan appeared on the roof of the square's government building appealing for calm but was shouted down by the crowd. The significance of such a senior official being shouted down by an angry crowd cannot be overstated. For Wang, a member of the Politburo who led the XUAR for 15 years - far longer than the usual 10 year limit designed to prevent regional leaders from becoming too powerful- to be shouted down by a clearly furious Han crowd was a disaster as far as Beijing was concerned. The protests on 4 September clearly showed that Wang had now lost the support of all sides in the restive province, and that, most worryingly for Beijing, the social contract between the Han mainstream in Xinjiang and the Party and government of "partners in stability" (Cliff, 2010) was now in tatters.

On 10 October, it was announced that charges had been brought against 108 suspects allegedly involved in the riot (China Daily, 2009). As of September 2012, Urumchi's Intermediate People's Court had sentenced 26 men to death, of whom the majority were Uyghur and two were Han. The trials have been criticized by Human Rights Watch, who reported that "judicial authorities in Urumchi and Beijing on July 11, 2009 effectively warned lawyers against accepting these cases by instructing them to exercise caution in dealing with cases relating to the riots, and telling partners at law firms to report such cases immediately and to "positively accept monitoring and guidance from legal authorities and lawyers' associations" (Human Rights Watch, 2009). In January 2010, the U.S. State Department voiced disappointment that China had not agreed to U.S. requests to observe the court proceedings and urged China to be more transparent in its trials in Xinjiang (U.S. Department of State Human Rights Report: China, 2010). Just before the first executions were carried out on 3 November 2010, it was announced that a new "Strike Hard" campaign had begun in Xinjiang with the intention of "further consolidating the fruits of maintaining stability and eliminating security dangers" (Reuters, 2009b).

Wang Lequan's removal and reaction

On 24 April 2010, Vice-President Xi Jinping flew to Urumchi to announce that Wang was being removed and replaced by Hunan Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian. Beijing squarely blamed mismanagement by local officials rather than

fundamental policy problems for the July riots. This was made clear at a top-level meeting on the development of Xinjiang in Beijing on 29 March when Vice Premier Li Keqiang and senior leader Zhou Yongkang called for collaboration between central ministries, designated provinces and municipalities, and Xinjiang's regional government to build the region into a "moderately well-off society" in the next decade. Zhou, who heads the CPC's Central Political and Legislative Affairs Committee, and who has long been China's top security official, pulled no punches when he called on the XUAR leadership to "set up work groups as soon as possible, to select competent officials to work in Xinjiang, to enhance the training of these officials, and immediately start projects that could solve urgent problems in Xinjiang" [Xinhua, 2010]. Such public, albeit veiled, criticism of provincial authorities is highly unusual in China and pointed to a clear breakdown in trust between Beijing and Urumchi in the last year of Wang's leadership.

In January 2010, it was reported that annual spending on security in Xinjiang would be increased by almost 90 per cent to 2.89 billion Renminbi (U.S. \$457 million). Making the announcement, Wan Haichuan, director of the region's finance department, said: "the government decided to increase the spending on public security this year to enhance social stability in Xinjiang". Speaking at the same press conference, Nur Bekri repeated the official assertion that the "three evil forces" of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism were responsible for the rioting in Urumchi [Xinhua, 2010]. In March that year, it was announced that Xinjiang planned to invest 120 billion Renminbi in 200 major projects in 2010, prioritizing the construction of "hydraulic engineering, transportation, communication, energy, ecological and livelihood projects" (People's Daily Online, 2010).

There was speculation that Zhang Chunxian's appointment might herald a new approach in Xinjiang. Much has been made of Zhang's reputation for openness and, ironically for a region where the internet had been blocked since the previous July, his use of the web to communicate directly with the people. Announcing Zhang's appointment, Xi Jinping said the ex-Minister of Communication was a man endowed with "liberated ideas, a clear-thinking mind and a spirit of creative thought" (China Daily, 2010a). Within days of his appointment it was announced that candidates applying for government jobs and those hired in the previous two years would have to learn Uyghur (China Daily,

2010b). However, even a cursory examination of the policy, which says that those who meet the other requirements but fail the language test will have to attend a three-month course, would suggest that officials might not be required to be all that proficient. In the months that followed the riots, there was no indication of any change in the policy of rigid security clampdowns coupled with huge investment. When Zhang was faced with riots and bombs in Hotan and Kashgar in the summer of 2011, his reaction was a swift security clampdown and further extension of the Strike Hard campaign. It is interesting to note that in the aftermath of the 2011 Kashgar attacks which left 19 people dead, local authorities said that those involved had received training in Pakistan (Demick, 2011). The central government would later play down any links at the risk of damaging relations with its “all-weather friend”.

Part Two

Perceptions, views and beliefs: prejudices and stereotypes

In seeking to understand what effect the violence of 2009 had on how both Uyghur and Han residents see themselves and each other, this section will focus on the relational content of a collective identities of these two groups. This relational content is composed of comparisons and references to other collective identities, “These comparisons can be thought of as the discursive formulations of the relations between groups of people that compose social reality” (Abdelal et al., 2006, p. 703). In his work on the Middle East peace process, Michael Barnett (1999) argues that identity represents “the understanding of oneself in relation to others”, Group identities, in short, are not personal or psychological, they are fundamentally social and relational, defined by the actor’s interaction with and relationship to others. Therefore, identities may be contingent, dependent on the actor’s interaction with others and place within an institutional context.

In order to demonstrate relational comparisons as identity content, this chapter examines the mutual perceptions, the views and beliefs Han and Uyghur interviewees hold about each other. It shall demonstrate that the two groups often express prejudices and strongly negative views of each other and will show how these views and beliefs affect relationships and social contact between Uyghurs and Han. It will also explore what effect increased political and social conflicts have had on these relational comparisons. Finally, it examines the relational comparisons people living in Xinjiang make with inner China. The key methodologies used to gather information on the content and contestation of

ethnic identity in Xinjiang were qualitative semi-structured interviews and both overt and covert participant observation methods. This qualitative approach allowed me to take advantage of my 10 years' experience living in and travelling to Xinjiang. In that time, I have built up a wide range of contacts in both the Han and Uyghur communities. These networks allowed trust to be established with my interviewees and ensured they were comfortable with the process and understood my purpose. In research periods between June 2009 and May 2012 I interviewed 121 people, of whom 64 were Han, 53 Uyghur, two of Hui ethnicity, and two Kazakh. This chapter presents just a short selection of these interviews but quotations have been chosen to give account of the most common themes that arose during interviews. Good qualitative research is designed to help people understand a situation in its entirety rather than to present something that is enigmatic and confusing (Eisner, 1991). Reliability and validity are both classical criteria for assessing the procedure and results of qualitative research (Flick, 2009). "Reliability refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observers on different occasions" (Silverman, 2000, p.188). The quotations presented in this thesis are examples of the most consistent responses to questions which were guided by my theoretical assumption and framework.

An indication of the deep rooted mutual distrust that exists on both sides was the large number of prejudices and negative stereotypes expressed by interviewees. It was also notable that many interviewees seemed more willing to express prejudices and negative stereotypes when being interviewed with others present rather than in one-to-one interviews. This reveals that the holding of, and expression of, prejudicial views was not just socially acceptable but also often socially encouraged. While the authorities may constantly stress ethnic harmony, it seems that this has not led to a social taboo on speaking disparagingly of other ethnic groups. An example of such prejudicial views was given by a 38-year-old Han restaurant owner:

"Unfortunately many Uyghurs are thieves; it is their nature and they have always been that way. Many Uyghurs make their living from stealing from people. I have been robbed in the past and so have many of my friends. It's not a case of education, they cannot be educated not to be thieves, they need to be severely punished and then they will learn." (Field research notes, November 2010)

Some Han interviewees also spoke of a poor Uyghur intellect, as seen in this

statement from a 31-year-old factory supervisor:

“One big problem I have in my job is that the Uyghur workers are not very smart. If you explain something to a Han you have to explain the same thing three times to a Uyghur. It is nearly always the case that the Uyghur worker won’t understand what I tell him. It is very frustrating but what can you do? You have to be patient with them.” (Field research notes, November 2010)

One Han woman, a 41-year-old Urumchi shop owner, expressed another common prejudice that Uyghurs are lazy:

“All Uyghur men want to do is get drunk and laze around, that’s all they think about. Many of them are very ignorant and they don’t want to work. We Hans are hardworking people but they are not. Ask anyone who employs them and they will all tell you the same, that it is very difficult to get them to do anything.” (Field research notes, June 2009)

Even before the 2009 riots, Han interviewees often mentioned that Uyghurs were dangerous and that they often use the knives their men traditionally carry for violence. It is legal for Uyghurs to carry knives but Hans are prohibited from doing so. A 22-year-old student from Korla warned me:

“You should be careful, especially at night-time. Uyghurs carry knives and some use them to rob people. If they see a foreigner they will think you have a lot of money and want to rob you and they might use a knife. They can be very dangerous.” (Field research notes, June 2009)

Prejudicial views of Uyghurs as dangerous and indolent are also held by many people in inner China. In the eastern cities where large numbers of Uyghurs have moved in recent years, there is a common belief that Uyghurs are heavily involved in crime. While some Uyghurs in eastern cities are involved in crime, especially pick-pocketing and selling hashish, the perception of many is that this is not an activity engaged in by a minority but a majority. I once saw a police notice poster in a Shanghai apartment block warning residents that a lot of “Xinjiang people” (新疆人) had moved to the area and that they should be careful. Reading this notice, any Shanghainese person would immediately assume that “Xinjiang people” meant Uyghur. These perceptions and prejudices fit with the identifying of ethnic minorities in China as wild and savage and needing to be tamed and civilized.

Uyghur interviewees were just as likely to mention prejudices and negative

stereotypes of the Han. One of the most common was that they were greedy and obsessed with money and that they are unscrupulous and lacking in morals. A 21-year-old university student originally from Korla but studying in Urumchi told me: *“A Han only wants to make money, that’s all he thinks about. He will do anything, even sell his son or sell his mother. They are obsessed, that’s all they talk about, all they think about. Every conversation is about how much this costs or how much they earned. It is because they have no religion, no faith; money is their religion. The Han here are even worse than in China because they came here just to make money. They don’t want to live here, they don’t like it, they don’t like the climate but they will stay here until they make money and that is what they obsess about. They are getting worse too. In my class all the Han now talk about is how much they spent on a mobile phone or their designer bags or clothes or whatever, it depresses me to hear them.”* (Field research notes, May 2012)

Other interviewees expressed a view that the Han could not be trusted in business dealings. One 65-year-old trader said:

“I have done a lot of business with the Han over the years and they have often cheated me. I do not really trust them. Sometimes they are OK and sometimes they are not but you ask any trader what they think of them and they will tell you the same thing, in general they are not to be trusted.” (Field research notes, June 2009)

Personal and food hygiene were also mentioned by many Uyghur interviewees. The Uyghur emphasis on strictly avoiding pork or coming into contact with pigs is not just a dietary prescription for many Uyghurs but is used as a means to separate and segregate themselves from the Han. For some interviewees, it was not just the fact that they ate pork that made the Han unhygienic, but it was just one aspect of their general “uncleanness”, a 21-year-old baker originally from southern Xinjiang but now living in Urumchi expressed his views in this way:

“Really the truth is the Han people are dirty. They eat pork, that is dirty, but also their homes are dirty. You can see where the Han live, there is always rubbish thrown outside. The kitchens are especially dirty. If you walk past a Han restaurant and you can see how filthy it is on the inside. It’s amazing any people would eat there, but they don’t care. They don’t care how dirty a place is or how dirty they are.” (Field research notes, November 2010)

This prejudicial stereotype was also expressed by other Uyghur interviewees, including a 34-year-old teacher in a Uyghur school just outside of Urumchi, who

told me:

“Many of the Han living here are from very poor parts of China. Some of them are very uncivilized. You can see it in the way they talk, they are always spitting and blowing their noses and in the noise they make when eating. Many of them do not wash very often. I really think there is a difference with Uyghur people. We Uyghurs think bathing and keeping a good appearance is very importance. Uyghur men visit the barbers almost every week for shaves and haircuts but you see so many Han men with dirty hair who don’t seem to care how they look.” (Field research notes, November 2010)

A majority of interviewees from both ethnicities, when asked about the major differences between Han and Uyghur, mentioned food, and very often it was the first difference mentioned. The following response from a 24-year-old female Han middle-school teacher was typical:

“The Uyghur and the Han are quite different, their cultural practices are different, and one of the main differences is the food. They [Uyghurs] won’t eat pork and they won’t go to a Han restaurant because they think they might be accidentally served pork. I don’t really know why that is. It is a practice that is maybe old fashioned and maybe as the Uyghur develop they may start to eat pork. My husband has Uyghur colleagues and sometimes we have dinner with them but we always have to go to a Uyghur or Hui restaurant. The food is OK but I prefer our Han food. It’s nice sometimes for a change but we are Chinese and pork is very important to us.” (Field research notes, November 2010)

Here we can see that the respondent, whose parents arrived in Xinjiang in the 1960s, equates the restriction on eating pork as something old fashioned and by extension backward (*louhou*). It is notable that this view is clearly linked to the Party’s conceptualization of the minorities as being helped by their Han brothers and sisters, whose arrival in their “frontier” regions has “liberated” them from their backward conditions.

The link between what is considered to be hygienic and the concept of what is “civilized”, and the creation of and adherence to constitutive norms, is particularly strong in Xinjiang.

Post-7/S relational comparisons

There was a notable increase in negative relational comparisons following the violence of July 2009. When conducting research in November 2009, with emotions still running very high on both sides, a number of interviewees

expressed more forcefully negative views than recorded at any other time in Xinjiang since I had first visited the region in 2002. While some interviewees expressed the view that such an event was unlikely to happen again, now that there was such a strong security presence in the region, many Han and Uyghur interviewees spoke of July 2009 and as having significantly impacted on the views and beliefs they hold about the other identity group.

While according to official figures (Xiao 2009) the majority of victims of the violence were Han, it was clear from my interviews that a significant proportion of Uyghurs believe that the number of Uyghur deaths was underreported. In the immediate aftermath of the violence, many Han interviewees followed the government line and blamed separatists and often specifically mentioned Rebiya Kadeer. As they spoke further, however, many became more critical of Uyghurs in general. An example of this in the statement of a 37-year-old Han businessman in Urumchi, who said he knew people who had been killed on the night of 5 July:

“7/5 was caused by people who want to split this country and it was planned from America by that Uyghur woman Rebiya. It was a deliberate attack on our country. As soon as the Uyghurs saw something was happening they started killing and beating Han people, they were just waiting for the chance. I have lived here all my life and I have always known Uyghur people and have done business with them but this shocked me, that given any chance, that they would kill me and my family. I will never trust them again.” (Field research notes, November 2009)

Another Han Urumchi resident, a 23-year-old driver, expressed similar views:

“No Han can ever trust a Uyghur again. When they got the opportunity they tried to kill us. They have done it before and they will do it again. Whatever about who organized it, the truth is they want to get us to leave here. We need the army and the police to protect us against these people and we will fight them and fight them to the death if we have to.” (Field research notes, November 2009)

Although the violence was for the most part confined to Urumchi, feelings were also running very high in Korla, as revealed by this 28-year-old bar owner:

“They [the Uyghurs] are capable of anything. They are dangerous. I am very afraid now. Before 7/5 I did not feel so afraid but I did not know what the Uyghurs were capable of doing. They killed so many people, it was so awful and shocking. We can never forgive them for what they did and we can never go back to being just neighbours. I think it changed everything here, it certainly did change how I see them.” (Field research notes November 2009)

Many Uyghur interviewees spoke of their fear that Han people would attempt to take revenge. While the security services prevented this happening in the days that followed the initial violence, the fear that it would happen at some stage was a recurring one. A 29-year-old Korla shop keeper expressed the view that this was a real possibility, especially when the police and military presence would decrease.

“Now there are so many police and army on the streets but they will not always be there. I have seen pictures and heard from friends what it was like on the day after 7/5, when there were Han on the streets, thousands of them with any sort of weapon they could get their hands on. I am really very afraid of this. It could happen at any time, those kinds of feelings do not just pass.” (Field research notes, November 2009)

For this 24-year-old Urumchi native, the July 2009 violence and the security clampdown that followed emphasized just how wide the gap has grown between the two groups:

“After what happened things will never be the same again. It was the most terrible thing that ever happened here. The night it happened I just wanted to get home and be with my wife and children and be safe. I did not open the shop for two weeks after. I was worried that I may be attacked. Many Uyghurs were killed in the days that followed, by the police and by people. It is hard to describe to you just how frightening everything was in those days. I am still very frightened. My children don't sleep very well any more, they wake up crying, they have nightmares. Everyone has nightmares.” (Field research notes, November 2009)

Relational comparisons with inner China

Many Han and Uyghur interviewees also expressed relational comparisons with people living further east, in the provinces that have traditionally been considered “China proper” or “inner China”. This reveals that both Uyghur and Han are developing a Xinjiang/East Turkestan identity and feel somewhat alienated from China. If anything can be said to unite the Han and the Uyghur, it is this sense of dislocation from the centre. While it may not be surprising that the majority of Uyghurs expressed a sense of difference from those living in inner China, it is significant that such a large number of Han interviewees expressed similar feelings. This was true not just of those who had lived in Xinjiang for a long time or whose families have been there for generations, but also for some more recently arrived migrants. According to one 68-year-old retired school

teacher, who came to Xinjiang in 1964:

“There is a difference between the people who live here and the people in other parts of China, I mean the Han people. Xinjiang is a different place in many ways, with different cultures and customs, life is different here. The climate. the food, so many things are different and of course this has an effect on the people. I think people in other parts of China don’t fully appreciate this, in fact they don’t know anything about Xinjiang really. It probably seems very far away from them. Xinjiang is still the new frontier and we live on the frontier. This makes us different from the Han people in other parts of China. We are all Chinese but there are different Chinese and the people who live here are not the same as the people who live in the east.” (Field research notes, May 2012)

A more recently arrived Urumchi Han resident, a 28-year-old taxi driver who had moved to Xinjiang from his native Anhui 10 years previously, said:

“I think there are many differences between the Han people who live here and the Han people who live in other parts of China. In Xinjiang, we Han are in a minority, and we live with many other nationality groups. There are many issues and also many problems because of this. Before I came here I did not understand any of these things but you learn quickly here, you have to. There are big problems here, like 7/5, which make you think a different way. People in other parts of China have no idea about this, they just see Xinjiang on the television or read about it in the newspapers but they have no idea what it is really like to live here and they don’t care.” (Field research notes, May 2012)

The increasingly unstable security situation was mentioned by some interviewees in the context of relational comparison with those further east. A 32-year-old businesswoman, who has lived in Xinjiang all her life but whose family are originally from north-eastern China, said:

“Of course we are different from the people in other parts of China. We are all Chinese but they don’t understand what it is like here. They don’t understand that it can be frightening just to walk down the street. It’s not just what happened on 7/5 but also the bombs and other attacks, it could happen anytime. The Han people living in other parts of China don’t have to live with that fear every day. I have cousins in Heilongjiang (a province in the northeast of China) and they ask me about it, they worry about me but what can I do, this is my home. The government is like this too, for all they talk about security and the need to protect people against terrorists and for all the money they put into Xinjiang, they don’t

know this place. There are no high-ranking leaders from Xinjiang, who were born here and understand here. In the Xinjiang government all the leaders are outsiders, how can they know what it is really like here when they have just arrived from Hunan or some other province. These are very different places.” (Field research notes, May 2012)

Some Uyghur interviewees also compared the Han in Xinjiang and the Han in other parts of China. For example, a 29-year-old doctor said:

“The older Han people are different from the Han living in the east. They have been here for a long time and have been influenced by the Uyghurs. You can see that in the way they understand us and understand difference. There is much more respect there. Not always of course, but in general. the older Han people are more respectful and sensitive. Younger Han are more like the Han in the east, they are not respectful and they know very little about us. Some of them are uncivilized and maybe dangerous; they don’t really want to know anything about us. The younger Han people here seem much more like the Han I met when I was in Beijing and Guangdong, they are often very ignorant about the Uyghurs. Many people in the east of China hold very negative views about Uyghurs, even though they don’t know any or have never met any.” (Field research notes, November 2010)

A 31-year-old Uyghur trader, who was originally from Kashgar but now based in Urumchi, expressed a view shared by many of my interviewees, that the people in eastern China did not understand the Uyghurs or want to understand them.

“The Han in China don’t know anything about us. All the talk about 56 peoples making up the Chinese people is not true at all. Only the Han are the Chinese people. Everything is their culture and their way and they don’t care anything about anyone else. They think of us as something wild and different to them. We think of them as alien and lacking belief. We could not be more different.” (Field research notes, November 2010).

Conclusion

In examining relational comparisons as an identity content through an exploration of the mutual perceptions between Uyghurs and Han Chinese, i.e, the views and beliefs the groups held about each other, this paper has demonstrated that strongly negative perceptions exist among both groupings and across all sections of society. These negative perceptions were expressed frequently by many interviewees and often took the form of negative stereotyping.

These negative views and beliefs of the “other” appear to have worsened and become significantly more prevalent since the July 2009 riots. For many people living in Urumchi, trust seems to have broken down between the two groups. Many interviewees expressed a fear of the other ethnic group and a belief that relations will not improve. The 715 riots will have a profound and lasting impact on Xinjiang.

In a recent paper, Raza Hasmath (2012) examines the increasing impact of migration on Uyghur and Han interactions in urban Xinjiang. It suggests that socio-economic factors, such as segmented labour shares and unequal sectoral distribution in occupational categories, coupled with growing Han migration that intensifies spatial inequalities in urbanisation patterns, have been a major reason behind the contemporary rise of ethno-religious consciousness among Uyghurs. He argues that tensions between Muslim Uyghurs and Han Chinese are not simply a reaction against the state but rather a set of social exchanges forged by both parties utilizing a subjective cost-benefit analysis. My findings would agree with this view but take it further by demonstrating how competition, cultural differences, and the misunderstandings, prejudices, and differing worldviews of the Uyghur and Han have led to a situation where both groups define themselves to a large extent in opposition to the other. The future of Han/Uyghur relations looks poor when both groups’ identity is so deeply entrenched in the expression of difference from the other.

Xinjiang is a deeply divided region with strong cleavages existing between both Han and Uyghur but also strong boundaries within boundaries developing in both groups. By emphasizing their relationship with cultural content this paper has demonstrated the salience of these boundaries. The subjective character of boundaries is precisely implicated by referring to their inner relationships with what they enclose and contain (Conversi, 1999). It is this relationship which provides evidence of something which would otherwise remain obscure to the external observer or analyst. Strongly negative views held by many Uyghur and Han interviewees about the other have been exacerbated by the violence of July 2009 and indicated a widening separation and entrenchment of boundaries between the two groups.

The need to raise boundaries, while forgetting the content they are supposed to defend, points to deeply rooted feelings of vulnerability and fear among both Han and Uyghur living in Xinjiang. Violence may well be an inescapable logical finale

to this parallel stress on boundaries and abdication of culture.

Notes:

[i] Personal interview, November 2009

[ii] Personal interview, November 2009

About the author:

Dr. David O'Brien is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nottingham's School of Contemporary Chinese studies and is currently based at their campus in Ningbo, China. he has lived and worked in Xinjiang for a number of years and has been a frequent visitor to the region since 2003. His research focuses on the construction of ethnicity and the relationship between state-assigned and self-ascribed identities.