

Developing the Land and the People: Social Development Issues in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (1999–2009)

Alessandra Cappelletti¹

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Abstract Social development in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region from 1999 to 2009 is the focus of this article. I will explore the current situation among Uyghurs and Hans living in Xinjiang in different social contexts and purviews, mainly assessing problems and open questions hindering a balanced and consensus-based social development in the area. The concept of “development” per se will be understood with a critical perspective. The fieldwork was conducted in 2011 and 2012 in Urumqi, Turpan, Kahsgar, Wujiaqu and Shihezi, and in eight rural villages—seven located in the Kashgar Prefecture and one in Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture. The opportunity to adopt an “insider perspective”, at the same time working with critical tools provided by the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, can be considered an important asset in the field of Xinjiang studies. My PhD research in China (2010–2013) and my work as consultant for KFW (2011–2012) have been of great help in adopting this approach. Interviews, participant observation and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from different sources are the basis of the fieldwork results presented here. UNDP indicators and indexes are taken as reference in setting and organising data.

Keywords Social development · Party-State · Islam · Élite co-optation · Development disparities · Power dynamics · Economic growth · Rural communities · HIV · China · Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region · Kashgar Prefecture · Uyghur · Han

Preliminary Notes on Sociological Research in China and Xinjiang

While modern sociology is considered to be born in Europe in the eighteenth century, in China, it gained credit only recently. Shortly after the 1949 Communist revolution,

✉ Alessandra Cappelletti
alessandra.cappelletti@gmail.com

¹ The American University of Rome, Rome, Italy

the subject was officially banned from education as well as from scholarly research. Influenced by Lenin's characterisation of Auguste Comte's sociology as bourgeois, the new government led by Mao Zedong terminated all sociological programs in 1952. Sociologists were labelled as guardians of the bourgeoisie and became easy targets of political censorship and torture during the anti-rightist movements and the Cultural Revolution. During the post-Mao era, Deng Xiaoping began to recognise sociology for the role it could play in improving education, mainly in the framework of the ongoing modernisation process in the country. The rehabilitation of sociology in China is marked by the re-establishment of the Chinese Sociological Association in 1979. Due to the past events, at that time, only a few sociologists were still in the country, and Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005) had been put in charge of the restoration of the discipline. Educated both in China and abroad, mainly with Bronislaw Malinowski at LSE, and with Robert Redfield at University of Chicago, he was deeply influenced by the American interpretations of sociology. Considered as China's first and most outstanding social scientist, he has also been the pioneer of scholarly research in sociological and anthropological issues related to Chinese minorities.

As a matter of fact, sociological research is a rather new scholarly field in China; this is why sociological case study analyses and fieldwork activities started to be carried on only recently.¹ Talking about sociological research in sensitive areas of China like Tibet and Xinjiang, we shall acknowledge that research studies and fieldworks conducted by foreigners with the scientific criteria of modern sociology are still scarce, mainly because of the difficulties and obstacles which researchers encounter in the area. For this reason, the tendency has been to rely on official data and figures, case studies and fieldworks conducted on limited samples, as well as on analyses which go beyond the limits of formal research. Hybrid sets of data are considered for analysis and interpretation, while a debate is still ongoing on research standards in minority areas. Accordingly, the first research studies which illustrate survey outcomes started to be published only recently in Chinese scholarly journals specialised in sociology and in a few scholarly publications in English language.² In this paper, a set of urban and rural areas have been chosen for analysis, and, adopting a "from inside" perspective, I focused on socio-economic conditions and intra-regional disparities, with an effort to identify the major determinants of inequality. In this process, I have been forced to thrust the criteria of formal research, with the intention of making new research hints emerge.

Some Remarks on Research Methodology

As already mentioned, indexes and indicators adopted for UNDP reports on social development have been considered as reference, as well as scholarly work on similar issues [3], while the scarcity of figures and data on specific items, mainly alcoholism, family violence and prostitution, did not allow me to fully respect the tight criteria of

¹ For a review of the developments in modern Chinese sociology, see Bian et al. [5, 6] and Zhou and Pei [57].

² Scholars who have conducted relevant research studies based on extensive fieldworks in Xinjiang are, among the others, Yang Shenming, Ma Rong, Abduresit Jelil Qarluq, Ilham Tohti, Zulhayat Ismayil, Rahile Dawut, Yitzhak Shichor, Justin Rudelson, Micheal Dillon and Joanne Smith Finley.

scientific analysis, turning to the available case studies, field works and indirect proxies, according to the scholarly debate on the possibility to generalise micro-analysis outcomes [16–18, 53, 54]. The generalisability of case studies and the scientific validity of research studies based on limited samples still constitute a subject for debate among scholars, but there are already works which overcome the rigidity of a strictly scientific approach and move towards a less formalised structuring of the analysis. These studies are the basis of our research methodology. The hybrid sets of indicators used by Bhalla and Qiu [3], indirect proxies adopted as reference material in microanalysis and in the historical field of microhistory [32, 21, 4], and cross-sectional analyses conducted on limited samples in studies on education and labour in minority areas [25, 26, 44–47], represent an interesting turning point in the methodology of researching Chinese minorities. A note shall be written on the volume *Poverty and Inequality among Chinese Minorities* by Bhalla and Qiu (2006), mainly for the new insights on 8.41 % of the Chinese population (China's 55 ethnic minorities), which account for 40–50 % of its absolute poor. As mentioned, this work is based on a hybrid set of indicators, mainly Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) household surveys and macro-data, referring to a vast geographical area and to culturally and linguistically different peoples.³ This work has been widely discussed among the scholarly community, mainly for its originality and new informative material, but it has also been criticised for the broad range of peoples it attempts to analyse: “minorities living in the North-West and the South-West have different socio-economic characteristics, and hence the patterns of poverty and inequality differ markedly between the two Western regions” [13]. Morris Rossabi [49] appreciates the fact that the two authors adopt Amartya Sen's capability approach, eventually providing useful policy advices, and that they identify the causes of the situation of minorities in economic rather than cultural factors, while Bjorn Gustaffson challenges some data on the basis of his own work [23] and underlines the difference in living standards among specific minorities.

In this paper, I make an effort to introduce themes like alcoholism and domestic violence in Xinjiang, working on a limited samplings due to the sensitivity of these topics within Uyghur society. In some cases, exhaustiveness and rigour have been put on a lower level than observation, interviews and research intuition.⁴

Due to the history and nature of Chinese sociological research, which have been sketched here above, the availability of data on a few issues is linked to different factors: For instance, while HIV in the region is widely researched and official figures are available, sociological problems like alcohol abuse, prostitution and domestic violence have not been extensively studied yet nor in-depth field research studies exist. For some issues, only case study analyses based on limited samplings are available; at the same time, the topics can be debated in the public opinion sphere and fully discussed in blogs or internet forum which bypasses censorship. For our enquiry on these more sensitive issues,⁵ I mainly rely on published and unpublished studies by the Uyghur scholars Abduresit Jelil Qarluq [44–47], Zullayat Ismayil and Ilham Tohti, and by the Chinese sociologist Ma Rong [35, 36]. In the case of alcoholism, I mainly rely on the proxy of pancreatitis and liver-related sicknesses: Their spread among the

³ For instance, Uyghurs have a Turkic origin, while the Mosuo in Yunnan have Sino-Tibetan roots.

⁴ The theoretical framework for our methodological understanding is mainly Feyereband [16, 17].

⁵ In this specific case, the wording “sensitive” does not entail political sensitivity but mainly means that such issues cannot easily be researched for cultural, ethnic and traditional stigma.

Uyghur population can be considered a warning light for the diffusion of alcoholism among Uyghur male population. On the basis of these works, we can assess that social problems like HIV, alcoholism and family violence are on the rise. The increasing trends in XUAR assume a special meaning: Some authors questionably blame the diffusion of social and health problems among Uyghurs to a somewhat intentional policy of the central government, which allegedly would be interested in causing damages among Uyghurs, but, in a broader sense, we can say that they contribute to the weakening of the capacity of autonomous management on the territory by local Uyghur authorities. In this sense, we can assume that, according to some authors, the spreading of these problems, like the overall inequality, follow an ethnic trajectory. In summary, we can say that data for this section have been collected from the existing articles by Uyghur and Western authors [2, 46], reports by area experts, China scholarly articles downloaded from the CNKI database, Chinese national and local government documents.⁶

Due to its special role in Xinjiang contemporary society, to the centrality of the issue and mainly to the unique transformations which is conveying in the texture and deep dynamics of Uyghur society, I decided to start our analysis with a survey on urbanisation process.

Xinjiang and Its Development

According to official data published in *Statistical Yearbooks* [78–81], outstanding progresses have been made in Xinjiang society from 1999 to 2009. Just to mention a few figures, “Rural household consumption” jumped from 43,828,000 Rmb to 105,661,000 annually. Urban consumption increased from 91,053,000 Rmb to 246,299,000 Rmb annually. Considering “education”, students enrolled jumped from 74,100 in 1999 to 253,300 in 2009. Number of hospitals increased from 1352 to 1669, while hospital beds were 65,916 in 1999 and became 107,193 in 2009. Engagement in works in infrastructures is testified by the following data: The length of paved roads was 2809 km in 1999 and 4940 km in 2009, while investments in Pollution Treatment Projects increased from 223,110,000 Rmb to 1,434,950,000 Rmb. In summary, data reported on the *Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook* outline a rising trend in all of the items. In order to put these positive achievements in an analytical and critical framework, we need to select a hybrid set of indicators and analyse them in deep.

Urbanisation

In considering “urbanisation” as a sociological concept and as a process which can produce inequalities, I mainly rely on the works by Kenneth Little (2004) on urbanisation in the African countries. In the history of Xinjiang, the Han settlements close to the Uyghur cities were called Han cities (汉城) or *yengi sheher/Hitay bazari*. Their establishment was basically meant at boosting economic development and cultural interchange, increasing fiscal revenues, matching the needs of the entrepreneurial class and spreading the Han system and culture all over the national territory. Classical

⁶ Xinjiang Centre for Disease Control, Xinjiang AIDS Working Committee Office.

sociology, modernisation theories and the diffusionist and structural schools all consider urbanisation as an important contribute to the nation building and stabilising process,⁷ a strategy which has been adopted also by the central authorities in China [39, 42]. Among Han settlements, the most important ones for the urbanisation process are the agricultural-military colonies supported by the central government: Efficient in both military and agricultural tasks, the inhabitants of these settlements became slowly accustomed to the new environment and started a process which can be seen as parallel to the growth of the oasis towns. The agricultural and military settlements, once called *tuntian* 屯田 and now named *bingtuan* 兵团, shall be considered as one of the main tools in the hands of the authorities to implement their plans of integrating the far-Western border region into the national economy and culture [51, 12, 6]. A comprehensive and detailed study on the Qing process of national integration of the XUAR into the national core can be found in Millward [41]. When the People's Republic of China was established under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong, the agricultural sector contributed for over 50 % of the GDP composition, while the boost to the urbanisation process has been mainly given with the implementation of the free-market reforms in 1979. According to the data of the November 2010 national census, more than 50.3 % of the Chinese (in total 1.34 billion) still lived in the countryside, while in 2012, the urban population surpassed the rural one for the first time [58]. The comparison of today's data with those of the first national census in 1953 shows that the urban population is now 36 % higher than then. For the first time, the census included migrant workers registered in their living place, rather than where they have their official residence (*hukou xitong* 户口系统), usually in remote countryside villages. China's factories and industrial zones are the main magnet of the cities job market and attract many urban residents and immigrants. According to the census results, more than 220 million Chinese had worked far from home for over 6 months in 2010, almost doubling the 2000 figure. The census figures announced by the Chinese government are actually not particularly surprising; they rather show a trend which has already been identified long ago.

What the data also show are some of the challenges and problems the government will have to cope with in the coming decades. For example, Chinese society is ageing: The growing amount of pensioners is looked after by fewer workers. China's one-child policy can be considered one of the causes of this situation. Moreover, as mentioned, migrant workers are 50 % more than 10 years ago. The so-called floating population (*liudong renkou* 流动人口) is mainly composed by farmers who move to the country's booming towns and cities to look for a job [38, 40]. The problems they face are several. Among them, in the urban environment they live in, the access to services is limited, for example healthcare and education for their children. Forced evictions and property speculation create social problems which might have an impact on the overall stability. Moreover, figures show that there is an imbalance in the proportion female–male population: Since nearly six boys to every five girls are born, the situation can turn into a social problem in the future.

According to *The Economist* [59], 5 years ago, in order to reach 80 % of China's middle class, a company needed to be present in 60 cities at least. To reach the same share in 2020, a company will need to set up venues in 212 cities. This means that the Chinese middle class is growing at a significantly fast pace.

⁷ An exhaustive review on the theories of urbanization can be found in Kasarda and Crenshaw [31].

It is thus clear that, while a high-powered and well off middle class can afford a life among skyscrapers offices, shopping malls, expensive cars and brand-new apartments, there is still a vast part of the population, mainly the floating one, which has to cope with everyday problems mainly due to the low wages and weak welfare conditions, ranging from access to adequate housing (the majority of them is living in *danwei* 单位 provided overcrowded dormitories, with public toilets and without kitchen services) to access to educational and healthcare services for themselves and the families. Moreover, holding a *hukou* from somewhere in the countryside restricts the possibilities to apply for social services and even the passport, to access to municipal subsidies and bank loans, and thus the transient status of the floating population creates a general sense of frustration, insecurity and social weakness. In addition, the frequent strikes and protests in the Chinese industrial cities make the authorities worry about the rise of inflation and the related increase of living costs, a situation which might be precursor of a divided society: a leisure class and a worse off one.

China is now undergoing one of the greatest demographic shifts in history. Shanghai reached 23,019,148 residents in 2010, and Beijing, Chongqing, Tianjin and Guangzhou became megalopolis. The official statements issued by the Chinese government declare that the promotion of rapid urbanisation is a means to improve living standards and productivity, while millions of peasant workers are moving to urban centres attracted by the construction boom and high wages. As a natural consequence, the pressure on space and resources is increasingly evident, with traffic growth rates and housing prices rising at a worrying level. But, the central plan to transform armies of peasants into citizens and tax payers has the priority in the government agenda, and the interests at stake lying behind the real estate and automotive industries are too much lucrative and politically relevant to be questioned on a political and social level.

The logic of the political measures implemented for the urbanisation of Xinjiang needs to be understood in this broader context [30]. While the Chinese central government states that development and stabilisation of the socio-political situation in the region are the final goals, I assume that more complex underlying dynamics, in which the relationship between the centre and its periphery is involved, are at the basis of the deep transformations of the rural and urban environment of the region. Especially after the riots started the 5th of July of 2009 and continued during the whole autumn of 2009, new insights on the impact of the fast urbanisation and development have been revealed: The efforts to solve the problem of the rural labour force surplus in the region have been translated into massive transfers of rural population to the cities inside and outside the region. All these people abruptly have been labelled as “floating population”, a part of society which sell its workforce for cheap. According to the fieldworks conducted by Prof. Abduresit Jelil Qarluq in the factories of coastal China, forced transfers of Uyghur peasant workers have been planned and implemented by the central government, with a deep impact on the texture of Uyghur communities in Xinjiang.⁸ To cope with all these issues, the Chinese government is adopting a mixture of modernisation and diffusionist measures, together with the transfer of consistent capitals and the implementation of development projects. The related statistical figures show that compulsory education rate, health system and the standards of living in

⁸ The issue has been extensively discussed during the lecture given by the author at “L’Orientale” in Naples on the 7 November 2012.

general are all benefiting from the rapid growth of urbanisation, but social problems like alcoholism, HIV diffusion, and the disruption of traditional social networks and ways of life are rearranged and questioned. The long-term political aim is to urbanise the countryside to facilitate not only economic but also political development, in order to set the conditions which could favour long-term growth and national integration. The related policies on language and Islam, and the diffusion of “modern” dressing codes and ways of life are pushing towards the full assimilation of the Uyghur regional majority into the national Han core.

Urban development becomes then the focus of the efforts by central authorities to boost economic growth and improve the people’s living standards.

Urbanisation Processes in Xinjiang After 1949

Tuning in Xinjiang Television is already a first step to understand the plans of the central government for Xinjiang development. The passive spectator is “bombed” with images of ancient oasis like Kashgar and Turfan, born out of the fragile ecosystem of the Taklamakan desert, turned into bustling cities with high skyscrapers, new apartment blocks, highways and overpasses, an impressive night illumination and an overall feeling of great expectations. The Uyghur and Han populations of the region are shown as living together happily, and pro-actively collaborating for the realisation of a modern and harmonious Xinjiang. All this is symbolising what Beijing and the Xinjiang CCP secretary Zhang Chunxian maintain to be its overt intention: Xinjiang will quickly become an economic and commercial hub in Central Asia, and its population will have the privilege to live in the new “Dubai of Central Asia” [60]. Huge investments on infrastructures and services, a strong emphasis on ethnic unity and dialogue in a modern environment, and the long-stated dream to transform the desert into a green and productive land, are rapidly changing the aspect and the nature of those human settlements which were the ancient Silk Road oases. The urbanisation model which is being followed is pretty much the same which made South-Eastern China become the most developed area in the country.

Xinjiang has experienced a considerable urban growth in the past 60 years, especially since the implementation of the socio-economic reforms started in 1978. In 1955, when the Autonomous Region was established, only three cities reached a population of 870 thousand people; in 2008, 21 cities had a total urban population of over 8.45 million inhabitants. Before focusing on the specific analysis, I would like to illustrate briefly the overall situation of the XUAR through its main statistical indicators.⁹ The 2009 total population in the region was of 21,586,300 people,¹⁰ with an increase of 1.3 % over the previous year, attesting a dramatic change since 1955, when the total population was only of 5,117,800 people. In 2009, 13,169,433 people of the registered population belonged to ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族), the main being the Uyghur national minority with 10,019,758 people, accounting for 46.42 % of the total population, while the second largest ethnic group, the Han, accounted for 38.99 % (8,416,867 people). An interesting figure is the increase of the Han in the region, which in 1949 accounted for not more of the 6 % of the total.

⁹ The data are taken from the Statistical Yearbook of Xinjiang 2010, etc.

¹⁰ Migrant workers and members of the armed forces are not included in the figure.

In 2009, 60.15 % of the total population of Xinjiang was still living in the countryside. According to several analysis and field research data, urban expansion enhanced geographic inequality between the two major regions in Xinjiang and created a selective distribution of wealth along ethnic lines [29, 33]. The main factors which can explain the outlay of urbanisation pattern in Xinjiang are geographical, such as topography and water system, institutional, such as urban policies, economic, such as per capita GDP, and social, such the education level of the population and migration issues. The state authorities played an important role in encouraging and arranging the immigration. A special frontier migration project and its institutions, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), have been the major vehicle of the huge waves of immigration since 1949 up to now. Together with the XPCC immigrants, there are also spontaneous migrants moving both to rural and urban areas. By 1982, about 2.3 million of the region's total population was XPCC residents. As a paramilitary organisation, organised in a series of state-owned farming-industry-commerce enterprises, its development went together with the history of the military troops in the region. The troops of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Xinjiang in 1949, in close collaboration with the People's Army of the Three Districts administration and the surrendered Guomindang troops. As a multinational army, it had around 200,000 soldiers in this region to defend and build the border frontier. The XPCC were institutionalised in 1953, and a great deal of work on farming, irrigation system building, mining, construction and light industry had already been carried out. According to the statistical branch of the XPCC, the number of formal employees in 1953 engaged in non-military jobs reached 93,000, including about 8000 non-Han. During the 1950s and 1960s, about 100,000 youths mainly from Shanghai and other large cities in the Eastern coastal areas joined the organisation, together with peasants from Shandong, Henan, Jiangxi, Hebei, Shaanxi and Sichuan. Different waves of spontaneous migration also enriched the Corps. By 1974, the population under the XPCC reached 2.26 million. It was one fifth of the total regional population and two fifths of the Han. The XPCC were dissolved for about 7 years between 1974 and 1981, and re-established after 1981. During this period, some of its industrial enterprises were separated from the XPCC, and the number of its members declined rapidly to 1.77 million in 1975. In 1983, its population reached 2.26 million, accounting for 16.9 % of the total, and for the 42 % of the Han in the region. The XPCC has played such a crucial role in social and economic development, frontier migration of Han people to Xinjiang since 1949, and in the ethnic relations among the different nationality groups, that its importance cannot be overestimated. With their own territory, agricultural venues, industries, commerce enterprises, courts and police, they administer two national level universities, Shihezi University and Tarim University, and five cities (Shihezi, Wujiaqu, Kuitun, Tumushuke, Alaer). These city inhabitants are mainly Han. The development of the mainly Uyghur cities has followed different paths, since once important Uyghur cities like Yarkent and Kuchar have now a lower administrative level than before, and did not develop like the others in size and services.

Statistical Figures on Urban and Rural Population

In 2009, urban population in Xinjiang was the 39.5 % of the total, up by 1.8 % in comparison with the previous year, while 60.15 % of the population was living in the countryside, with an increase rate of 1.0 %. The urbanisation rate was 39.9 %.

At the end of 2009, the per capita disposable income of urban residents was 12,258 Yuan, up by 7.2 %, while rural residents' per capita disposable income was 3,883 Yuan, up by 10.8 %. The Engel coefficient of urban households was 36.3 %; the one of rural households was 41.6 %.

Taking a step back of about 10 years, we see that in 1998, the total population in Xinjiang was of 17,473,500 people, the 50.10 % of which was living in urban settlements while 49.90 % in the countryside. The increase in rural population can be due to the boost of the agricultural sector, mainly by the XPCC and by new waves of migrants which have been absorbed by the agricultural enterprises.

In 2009, the population employed in agricultural activities was the 64.72 % of the total work force, while 35.28 % was working in non-agricultural activities.

In 1978, when the total population was of 12,330,100 people, 26.7 % was living in cities and 73.93 % in the countryside. The data show that the trend is towards an urbanised society. If we take a look at the disaggregated figures, taking into account prefectures, cities and autonomous administrative divisions, we see that between 80 and 90 % of the Uyghur population lives in the countryside.¹¹ Moreover, only one fifth of Uyghurs live in Northern Xinjiang: Since ancient times, the Tarim Basin in the South of the region has been the most important geographical setting for Uyghurs' oasis. Southern Xinjiang has only 33.3 % of the total cities and 35 % of the urban population. This means that the increase of the urban population is mainly due to migration from the interior (*neidi*) and to Han population being mainly employed in urban activities and contributing to the speed up of the urbanisation process.

The unequal development in Xinjiang is the object of scholarly research since the 1990s, but an extensive analysis and an organic survey still need to be realised [43]. In this work, I argue that, in spite of the efforts of the central authorities to create a more equal and harmonious urban society, evident differences between the Han and the Uyghur population living in today Xinjiang cities still exist. Uyghurs are mainly living in rural realities; they are mainly employed in rural jobs and enjoy a lower degree of well-being in comparison to the Han population. The income is lower, the access to services and developed urban contexts are more difficult, and work opportunities and possibilities of social progresses are limited. The urban model of development has thus been challenged for the fact that it seems not to benefit the whole Chinese citizens, and by the reality of facts, and probably needs to be revised.

Among the scholar community, the debate is about the internal colonial model: Is it apt to describe and interpret the current situation in Xinjiang, while Gladney and Moneyhon are in favour of the internal colonialism hypothesis, while Sautman rejects it?

A lot of factors included in the model are suitable for the interpretation of the Xinjiang situation, while others need to be revised according to the specific historical, political and social environment.

Because of huge immigration and the variety of new opportunities created by industrialisation and urbanisation, including development of education and public healthcare, even when acculturation and structural assimilation occur simultaneously at a relatively high level, it does not necessary lead to the absence of prejudice and the

¹¹ Tongji Nianjian 2010 and data collected during field research studies conducted by Prof. Ilham Tohti and Yang Shengmin of Minzu University of China.

absence of value and power conflicts. Value and power conflict may be defined as the struggle among different nationalities over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources, and economic opportunities. Conflict may break out over the distribution of a great variety of scarce values and goods, such as income, status, power, dominion over territory or ecological position.

Preliminary Conclusive Notes

According to the examined material, I summarise here below some of the most interesting points which could be discussed and researched in the future:

On the basis of the last fieldwork conducted in August and September 2012 in the Kashgar Prefecture, a new phenomenon is emerging in the poor rural areas of Southern Xinjiang: Small Uyghur Villages enjoying the coolness of the local white poplars¹² are being demolished and re-built as Han Chinese-style towns. While Uyghur Villages have usually a central square with trees and a mosque, and several lanes with one-storey houses at both sides, the new towns usually consist of a central square which is a wide cement platform, with a big staircase and a tribune at the top end, surrounded by waving red flags, and Han Chinese-style red lanterns as illumination system for the night. Han dances and musics are performed in the evening. *While the “modern-style” built-up area which develops from the central square is mainly populated by Han Chinese newcomers, the local Uyghur population tends to be marginalised in the poor rural areas at the outskirts of the towns, which barely enjoy the newly-built facilities and infrastructures which are appearing together with new waves of migrants.* This new phenomenon which characterises urbanisation in Xinjiang has been recorded in Yopurgha County, Peyzawat County, Shufu, Shule and Akto Counties.

Urbanisation in Xinjiang can be considered as integral part and sharing the same intents and aims of the wider process at a national level. The model applied is the same for the whole national territory. The policies, funding, political and economical directives are defined by the central government, which leaves little space to local and private initiatives.

However, Xinjiang has some peculiarities which need to be taken into consideration: The majority of the population is of Uyghur nationality (different language, religion, physiognomy, historical and cultural influences, memories), the geographical position is strategic and sensitive, the natural resources are abundant, the Government emphasises a terroristic threat mainly linked and connected to the groups of Uyghur emigrées in the USA and Germany (mainly the World Uyghur Congress).

*Since Xinjiang is considered a political problem, the plan of the central government is to assimilate the Uyghur population into the Han cultural core mainly through a process of acculturation and intermarriage.*¹³ In the intents of the authorities, the urbanisation process must play an important role in the implementation of this policy. The statistical and field-research evidences, together with the analysis of the scholarly community, demonstrate that urbanisation proceeds on ethnic and cultural lines. Thus, it seems that the Han population is gaining the main benefits from the urbanisation policies and process.

¹² Called *baiyang shu* 白杨树 in Mandarin, and Tirek in Uyghur. These trees are particularly respected by the local Uyghur population for the coolness they guarantee during the dry but very hot summers, and as barriers against the sandstorms.

¹³ Personal communication by a Han Party official.

The vast majority of the Uyghur population is still living in the countryside. Despite the government proclaimed successes in the fields of infrastructures, electricity, tap water, health and education in rural contexts, there is probably the need to include the minority population into the implementation of the social model, and if this does not happen, part of the population can perceive it as imposed from the top. The result is that a vast majority of the population is excluded from the larger process of urbanisation, naturally connected with industrialisation and modernisation. Hand in hand with the urbanisation problem goes the difficulty of the central authorities to carry on the integration plan for the Uyghur population, mainly in the economical, political and cultural fields. This situation can create tensions which sporadically find a channel in violent explosions.¹⁴

Thus, *urbanisation in Xinjiang seems to follow ethnic lines*, with the Han population receiving almost all the benefits of a booming development. The difficulties and discriminations suffered by Uyghurs in the cities of *neidi* have been researched by Qarluq 2011c, while the social situation of Uyghur residents in Xinjiang cities still needs to be researched.

At the same time, there is a *rising trend in the Uyghur emigration from rural to urban areas*. Uyghur workers are more and more present in the underpaid jobs in the construction and restaurant sectors, but through this channel, they are starting entering the urban job market and mobility. This process will allow Uyghurs to ask for better and more paid jobs and gradually take advantage of educational and service opportunities offered by urban environment. Better educational opportunities and job mobility will allow a part of the urban Uyghurs to improve and better their life conditions, putting them in the condition to gradually participate in the decision-making dynamics related to modern urban contexts. This is an ongoing trend which is interesting to be observed and followed.

On the other hand, *in the Uyghur society, there is not a univocal voice and a widespread consensus over a policy to be followed in order to obtain a major degree of representation*. The Uyghur society is divided between acceptance of the acculturation process (usually for different reasons) and resistance to it (in different ways). The lack of Uyghur cultural references and political representatives is due for a great part to the central policies which contributed to the difficulty to publish in Uyghur language and to the difficulty, for Uyghur intellectuals, to freely express their views. The lack of a real political representative is through the main problem now affecting Uyghur society. As in internally colonised societies (Hechter), this leads to an amount of social problems as corruption, alcoholism and depression, all factors which discourage a process of self-consciousness and political awareness. In the Xinjiang booming cities, it is becoming more and more evident the gap between the Uyghur bourgeoisie and the population relegated to the low strata of society: While this process can help the incorporation, it will worsen the social tensions. As we read in Ping (1990), urban realities are more apt to give birth to an assimilationist process.

But, here, we can stop and pose some questions: If the aim of the modernisation/ industrialisation and urbanisation processes is to stabilise the area and integrate the Uyghur population into the Han core culture and development, it seems that something is not properly working.

¹⁴ See the facts of July and September 2009 in Urumqi and in several other cities in the region.

Thus,

1. Are the Uyghurs too backward and their culture too outdated at the point that integration into a modern society takes a long time to occur?
2. Is the political establishment not able to reach the aim of stabilisation due to misunderstanding and communication/cultural problems? Or to the fact that the urbanisation model chosen in Xinjiang is not appropriate to the special characteristics of the region?
3. Is there a resistance to adaptation by the Uyghur part due to the fact that they are not involved in the decision-making process and they perceive that a superimposed urbanisation model is being implemented, so that these policies cannot be effective as they could?

To try to answer these questions could be object of further field researches and analysis.

HIV

Since China's first officially reported indigenous case was identified in Ruili County, in the south-western province of Yunnan, in the year 1989, HIV diffusion has been geographically and numerically impressive over the whole national territory. Today, the virus reached all the 31 provinces and municipalities of China. On the spread of HIV on a national level, both first- and second-hand material is available [61]. Up to 1998, Xinjiang accounted for 37 % of all reported HIV infections in China.¹⁵ These were found mainly within the Uyghur majority population, representing over 85 % of HIV infections in the region: over 94 % of them were in the two cities of Urumqi and Yining, with a particularly strong IDU infection rate, standing for 85 % of the total in Yining in 1999 (over twice the percentage of Urumqi). Always in 1999, XUAR had the second highest number of patients with HIV/AIDS and the highest rate of increase in China, after Yunnan province.¹⁶ Since the year 2000, the HIV increase rate has been attested at around 0.13 %, a remarkably high figure if we consider the national data, 0.05 %. The areas which are more interested by the epidemic are the cities of Ghulja, Urumqi and Kashgar, even if scholars warn that this could simply be the result of increased medical checks in those urban areas. According to the data reported by Gill and Gang [2], around 60,000 people are HIV-infected in the region. This figure is consistent with what has been reported by the news: In an article appeared on China News on the 1 December 2011,¹⁷ the journalist writes that the number of HIV infections exceeded 60,000. This means that, on a per-capita basis, Xinjiang is the heaviest-hit

¹⁵ For figures about HIV/AIDS in Xinjiang, I mainly rely on [1], on the report on the issue by the Australian Agency for International Development in the framework of the *Prevention and Care Project* (2000) and on the WHO Reports

¹⁶ Reference works in Chinese language are, among the others, the Report of the CASS (2006), Zhang (2005), Xu (2005), together with MA thesis discussed in different universities in Xinjiang, mainly consisting in fieldworks on limited samples, some of which are indicated in the related section in the Bibliography in the final part of this work.

¹⁷ "HIV infections exceed 60,000 in Xinjiang. 4777 persons died", in *China News*, 1 December 2011.

province among the Chinese regions by a large margin. In fact, while accounting for around 1 % of the Chinese total population, it represents 10 % of its estimated HIV-infected population. At the same time, it is still a problem to obtain reliable data on infections, since HIV is still a serious stigma in Chinese society, and it is considered even more serious in the traditional Uyghur Islamic environment. The main problem with this disease is that part of HIV carriers is not aware of their condition, mainly in rural areas, where health facilities and checks have been introduced as a normal practice only recently. At the same time, part of those who have this awareness often do not disclose it to family members and friends for fear of exclusion in their community and retaliation in their work environment.

At the end of 2005, the Ministry of Health estimated that approximately 650,000 (range 540,000–760,000) persons could be HIV-positive in China, with about three quarters of them living in five Chinese provinces: Yunnan, Henan, Xinjiang, Guangxi and Guangdong. Always at the end of 2005, in some provinces such as Yunnan, Henan and Xinjiang, HIV prevalence rates exceed 1 % among pregnant women and among persons who receive premarital and clinical HIV testing. This figure meets the criteria of the UN Joint Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) for a “generalised epidemic” (China HIV Demography). According to the document “China HIV Demography”, in Xinjiang, where the epidemic is currently concentrated among Uyghurs Injection Drug Users (IDUs),¹⁸ HIV spreading is going to affect CSWs and the larger population soon. The high rate of mother-to-child transmission¹⁹ cases is seen as the most worrisome phenomenon related to HIV diffusion in Uyghur society.

As mentioned, the biggest part of HIV-positive population in Xinjiang is represented by IDUs. In the 1980s, heroin and opium abuse were a serious social problem in China. Opening borders, rising incomes and increasing personal mobility all contributed to a growing epidemic of drug abuse. In other cases, the increasing social problems of joblessness and social alienation led more and more persons to drug use. Heroin and opium were first available in the south-western border areas, mainly along the Yunnan and Myanmar borders. Much of the heroin imported to China is produced in Myanmar and is easily smuggled across the mountainous border. Smuggled into Yunnan and Guanxi Provinces, it is ultimately destined to Xinjiang, or to cities along China’s prosperous East Coast, where it is either consumed or smuggled abroad. Another important channel for smuggling drugs into Xinjiang is the Gwadar pass at the border with Pakistan [24].

In China as a whole, ethnic minorities—such as Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, Yi in Southern Sichuan province, and Dai and Mosuo in Yunnan province—were disproportionately represented among drug-using populations and HIV-positive populations. Seven provinces—Yunnan, Xinjiang, Guangxi, Guangdong, Guizhou, Sichuan and Hunan—account for nearly 90 % of HIV/AIDS cases among IDUs in China, with each province having more than 10,000 such cases. The other relevant part of the population which suffers from HIV infection is the already mentioned CSWs. For instance, in Turpan, the percentage of infected CSWs reaches 4.3 %, and in Ili 3.3 %, with peaks of more than 10 % among them in the most severely infected areas. Data which appear on case study analyses conducted by researchers and medical staff at

¹⁸ UNAIDS (2002)

¹⁹ Ibid

Xinjiang Medical University point to increased vertical transmission of HIV from mother to child, as demonstrated by the prevalence among pregnant women, such as 5.3 % in Kashgar. According to the most recent reports on the situation, in Xinjiang, where the epidemic is currently concentrated among ethnic minority IDUs, it will, with time, break out to affect CSWs and the larger population, eventually becoming a threat for the whole community.

In Xinjiang context, vulnerability to HIV is aggravated by many factors, including migration, economic disparities, inequality between men and women, and industrial development policies that attract workers from all over China. Vulnerable groups, those who are more likely to engage in behaviours that put them at risk of sexual and blood-borne infection, include commercial sex workers, workers in bars and entertainment centres, injecting drug users, workers in beauty salons, and long distance truck drivers. Many of these form part of the migratory and floating population, which is primarily adults of sexually active age, who often lack access to appropriate services, have disrupted social norms and face discriminatory policies. Male-to-male sex practitioners and street children are categories at high risk of HIV infection.

The several support projects on HIV awareness and treatment, for instance the AusAid and UNAID ones, make an effort to address to the causes of this situation. The main reasons which have been identified are basically three: (1) cultural and religious environment, which is Islamic and male-centred and does not allow women to expect men to use AIDS-preventive contraceptives like condoms, (2) a lack of state and local authorities response to the situation, which entails measures which are not effective and are not targeting the whole of the HIV-positive population, and (3) the increased personal mobility and the migration of millions of peoples from Inner China to Xinjiang, together with the effects of the opening and increased exchanges at the Western borders, especially with Pakistan.

In their article published in 2011 on the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, the two authors Qarluq and Hayes assume that the spreading of HIV, together with the fact that the measures taken by the authorities are not making determined efforts to effectively deal with this situation, could eventually end up to represent a threat not only for social cohesion in Uyghur society but also for the political and social stability on a national level and even beyond to the whole Central Asian region. The resentment of Xinjiang locals against the government for not being able to solve the issue is seen as a potential threat for China overall stability. While HIV epidemic in Xinjiang is identified as one of the most serious threat in the region, its spread has been assessed to disproportionately interest minorities. According to the data provided by the authors, Xinjiang accounts for almost 40 % of all HIV infections in China, while 85 % of those infected in Xinjiang are Uyghurs. The age range of HIV-infected Uyghurs seems to reflect the patterns of positivity recorded in Sub-Saharan Africa.²⁰ Since according to the fieldwork conducted by the two authors, the Han population, including sex workers, have a higher knowledge of HIV and its ways of transmission, it seems that the planned measures to tackle with the problem are more effectively impacting the Han population. A big part of Uyghur sex workers do not know Chinese language and do not have access to the material distributed by the HIV prevention centres, and cultural and ethnic reasons are also indicated as the source of the ethnic impact of the HIV.

²⁰ Information collected at the Xinjiang Centre for Disease Control in 2007.

There are authors [19] which blame this unbalanced situation to the unstable ethnic and political environment in the region, which allegedly nullify the effectiveness of the political measures implemented to deal with HIV positivity. HIV infection in the region follows ethnic lines and could eventually have an impact on the national situation as a whole, both at the political and social level. According to Rudelson [62], nationalistic Uyghurs assume that the spread of HIV among the Uyghur population in Xinjiang is part of a political plan to eliminate Uyghurs and reframe the demographic balance in the region, something similar to a genocide.

The positive outcomes of the measures taken by the authorities are summarised in what Juret Kerim, Deputy Director of the Xinjiang AIDS Working Committee Office, told to Qarluq and Hayes or their article on the topic. Since at least 2003, the Chinese Minister of Health started to allocate substantial fundings for the implementation of programmes aimed at solving the problem of the increasing rate of HIV-infected in the whole of China and Xinjiang. Moreover, international projects and fundings started to be accepted by China since the same year,²¹ in order to make international health organisations and NGOs to cooperate with the Chinese government on this sensitive issue. A brief outlook about these programmes actions, measures and fundings can be found in Gilles and Gang (2006), p.44.

Alcohol Abuse

While studies on the relation between alcohol abuse and minorities are plenty,²² as well as those on alcoholism in China (demonstrating that there has been a striking increase of alcoholists and related problems, over recent decades), comprehensive studies on the same issue in Xinjiang, and in particular among Uyghurs, are still lacking. In this context, we need to use proxies like alcohol abuse-related sicknesses—for instance acute pancreatitis and liver disorders—in order to gain a better insight into the actual situation. Case studies conducted by équipes of researchers and doctors, published in journals of medical sciences, are particularly useful to draw some interesting, even if only partial due to the limited samplings, information. In the analysis of the outcomes of these case studies, we shall put a particular attention on the bias entailed by the fact that the percentage of the Uyghur population who turns to hospitalisation is still very low, mainly because of the high costs of healthcare,²³ but also for the still strong attachment to popular beliefs and traditional practices. With 80 % of Xinjiang's healthcare services located in urban areas—mainly populated by Han Chinese—rural Uyghurs do not enjoy an efficient healthcare assistance. The result is that many people residing in rural areas seek out the services of unregistered medical clinics that are often below standards, staffed by practioners lacking professional training. In the article by Wang and Zhang (2012), on a sample of 1148 patients affected by acute pancreatitis selected in Hospital No.1 in the regional capital Urumqi, researchers found out, and elaborated in statistical data, that the large majority of the patients affected by

²¹ Mainly programmes by the UN, World Bank, Global Fund, AusAid, United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Clinton Foundation.

²² A rich bibliographical survey can be found in [10, 27, 19].

²³ See the paragraph here below.

pancreatitis caused by alcohol abuse are Uyghurs [62]. In the same article, authors draw the conclusion that these outcomes must reflect the particular inclination towards a high consumption of alcohol among Uyghurs. On the contrary, but again keeping in mind the structural bias of these outcomes, and the consequent underestimation of real numbers, we also need to mention data collected on the field in hospitals official documents: Among a sample of 4023 patients selected from Hospital No.2 in Urumqi, and affected by serious liver problems, only 14.8 % are Uyghurs, while 76.4 % of them are Hans [62]. At the same time, the major source of these liver diseases among the hospitalised Uyghurs has been identified in “alcohol abuse”. As another source of outcomes bias, we shall consider that Urumqi is a predominant Han City and that Uyghurs living there, when they decide to turn to hospitalisation, they might prefer to address themselves towards hospitals adopting Uyghur traditional medicine, and thus underestimation of data can be even more serious. According to one study realised among 396 undergraduate students at Xinjiang Medical University, the proportion of minority students, mainly Uyghurs, who have a lifestyle which would easily affect the health of the person in the future, are much higher than that of the Han students. Among the indicators used by the researchers, alcohol abuse and smoking were among the most important.

According to part of foreign Xinjiang scholars and experts, a deep impact on alcohol abuse and on the diffusion of prostitution needs to be ascribed to the growing numbers of Han Chinese migrants moving to Xinjiang and to the fact that the majority of them is male between 25 and 45 years old, single, and apparently considers the regions as a temporary destination, where he can spend some years, do a well-paid job, save money and then go back to his home town. In this context, there is no personal commitment with the area, which is simply considered as a place which can be exploited and eventually left. Under these conditions, these people are not willing to claim a better society for Xinjiang, but they simply pursue the short-term fulfilment of their personal needs. The importance of alcohol for the Hans is also considered a fundamental factor: The history of the Chinese brewing industry can be traced back to 4000 years, and alcohol has a high status in traditional Chinese culture, being as well a frequent theme in Chinese classical poetry. During official and representative dinners, alcohol has a ritual meaning, its consumption following a strict hierarchical plot. If a superior in level offers a shot, it is impossible to refuse drinking, being this acts seen as a sign of respect and, among friends, affection. Taken into this loop of bilateral and coral toasts, usually proposed by the highest in level at the table, the most common ending of official dining is that everybody needs to get heavily drunk. Another problem is that alcohol is consumed in a very chaotic way, without respecting any alcohol gradation order, starting with drinking lower gradation beverages, and proceeding with those with higher gradation. When this drinking culture is exported to Xinjiang, it is normal that the local Uyghur population absorbs it, mainly in the government and official environment, where it is almost compulsory to adjust to this habit if a cadre wants to be respected in the job environment and also wants to see improvements in his future career.

If we dare to make a conclusive assumption, we shall acknowledge that alcoholism represents a social problem among the Uyghur male population ranging from 16 to 55 years old. A traditionally mild form of Islam, mainly a Sufism belonging to the broader Central Asian Islamic environment, is also a factor which does not help Uyghur

society to protect themselves from habits which are usually strictly forbidden by the Muslim religion, like alcohol abuse and prostitution. In order to understand the situation more in deep, we can also rely on historical analysis where the cultural and customary background in Xinjiang is outlined. For instance, referring to 1830, L. Newby [64], p. 296 states:

Reports by travellers of the almost decadent life-style of the local Muslims,

the prevalence of prostitution, the drinking of alcohol and smoking of hashish, should not be interpreted as a sign of “sinification”, but rather as a reflection of the lack of a strong Islamic authority.

The same hint to a “soft” and liberal Islamic identity and culture is made by Ahmed Rashid, in his book *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (2002), where Uyghur militants willing to get trained in the camps in Pakistan and Uzbekistan were often not taken seriously by the Islamic leaders due to their alleged ignorance on the moral and principles of Islam.

The reason why I quote these lines and assumptions is because I think they add some knowledge on the cultural and customary background which characterises Xinjiang and its peoples, beyond the local Islamic faith.

Women’s Condition

Uyghur women who live in very traditional rural environments normally get married between 15 and 18 years old, they are not expected to work, but to engage themselves in household related activities. In case the family’s conditions are too poor, they still need to go farming. After marriage, they usually take care of children and of house activities, like preparing food, cleaning and caring for the elders. Marriages usually take place among members of the same community, sometimes the couple even belongs to the same larger family: The main idea is that properties and capitals shall remain inside the familial line.²⁴ This very traditional way of life supports an idealised woman, shy, good at dancing and singing, in charge of transmitting moral and religious values to the next generations. Women are considered as examples of morality and purity for the whole community. In some cases, they can even be respected religious teachers, Sufi leaders or wise figures, with a charisma which becomes stronger when they grow older.²⁵ The position that women occupy in society, and their related roles, does not match with the duties that women need to accomplish in contemporary China. The role of women, such as it emerged in Chinese society after Mao, is that of an individual who independently builds her future, in a position of quasi-parity with their male counterparts. Beijing wants to facilitate encounters between Uyghurs and Hans; for this reason, intermarriage is strongly encouraged, at the point that it became an important

²⁴ This is a very common idea in the clans and tribal societies with a nomadic history in the whole of Central Asia.

²⁵ Interesting research studies on Uyghur women who are recognized Sufi leaders and wise figures for the community have been realized by Rahile Dawut, Professor of Uyghur Folklore at Xinjiang University.

goal in the political agenda of the central government towards the Uyghur minority.²⁶ On the other side, intermarriage is not accepted among Uyghurs, especially if the person involved is a Uyghur woman. In special cases, it is not a big problem if an Uyghur woman marries a foreigner of Islamic creed, or who converted to Islam, but if an Uyghur woman marries a Han man, she can be easily rejected by the community, as well as by her family. Intermarriage between Hans and Uyghurs is a very rare phenomenon, which can only be found in cities like Shanghai and Beijing, mainly among rich and wealthy élites, often in the community of artists and musicians. For this reason, Beijing still has a long way to go before seeing its populations really mixed.

Reference works on the life of Uyghur women are mainly MA and PhD theses, the majority of which are written by students at Minzu University of China, together with articles published on Chinese scholarly journals.²⁷

At least since 2005, the Chinese government implemented a series of programmes to relocate groups of unmarried Uyghur girls, aged from 16 to 22 years old, from their villages in Xinjiang countryside to big cities in Inner and South-Eastern coastal China, where they usually get a temporary employment in textile factories.²⁸ The nature and impacts of these measures on Uyghur society are still subject of a lively debate: While part of the Han Chinese scholarly community believes that these policies represent an opportunity for young Uyghur girls to move from a poor countryside, where their destiny would be to get married and have children at very early ages, to big cities, where, after the expiry of their temporary contract, they might find new job opportunities and start a new life, concerns have been raised among the Uyghur community, since in the majority of cases, the relocation is not voluntary but planned and compulsory. Moreover, the female peasant worker moves from Xinjiang without having personally signed any labour contract, which is instead signed by local authorities and employers. In order to manage the implementation of these policies, a whole “management system” has been set up: One Uyghur local cadre is relocated to any factory where there are Uyghur workers, and he or she is in charge of supervising these employees. This is a clever way to avoid direct contacts, and potential problems, between Han bosses and Uyghur workers, which could highlight tensions and make latent conflicts outbreak. The Uyghur supervisor is in charge of all the aspects of the private and working life of the employees. There are cases of very early marriages imposed by Uyghur parents on their daughters, in order to prevent them to be forcibly relocated from their home villages. Extensive field research studies about these women conditions have been carried out by Prof. Abduresit Jelil Qarluq in different contexts in China. According to the outcomes of these works, the government plans of relocation of Uyghur women in big cities are highly disruptive for Uyghur communities and society as a whole. Qarluq makes a clear distinction between those who move voluntarily and those who are forced: While the former are willing to learn Chinese and to start a new life in a modern urban environment, the latter develop a form of disorientation and rejection symptoms which have deep impacts on their future life.

²⁶ According to an interview released by a Central Government official, working in the office of Prof. Yu Keping, in Beijing (June 2009), the authorities plan to make Hans-Uyghurs intermarriage more and more frequent.

²⁷ A good bibliographical survey can be found in the PhD dissertation by Wei Baihan [65].

²⁸ An overview of these policies has been presented by Prof. Qarluq during his lecture at Università “L’Orientale” di Napoli on 7th November 2012.

According to the author, their destiny is more or less pre-determined: If they do not go back to their villages anymore, they become low-paid workers or, in the worst situation, prostitutes, in big cities of Inner and coastal China. Those who go back to Xinjiang suffer from exclusion and prejudices by their communities, since they are believed to having got a sort of “contamination” from a hostile and non-Muslim society. Several reports and analysis on the issue have been released by organisations of Uyghurs abroad like Uyghur Human Right Project (UHRP) and Uyghur American Association, the reliability of which still needs to be tested.

Another problematic issue for Uyghur women is wearing headscarf, mainly the right to wear it. In public institutions, like schools, universities and public offices, it is forbidden to wear headscarves, and the local authorities are implementing more and more campaigns to encourage women not to wear it also in the remotest rural areas of the country. The effort to spread these measures among the broader Uyghur women population is testified by posters attached to each household door, with pictures reproducing which kind of headscarf is allowed to wear for women, and how men should cut their beards. In substance, head scarves and long beards are considered as signs of illegal religious behaviours. Campaigns aimed at discouraging Uyghur women to wear head scarves are enforced regularly in the most traditional Uyghur areas of Khotan and Kashgar, and they occasionally end up with outbreaks of violence, like in Khotan in the summer of 2011, when deadly clashes between demonstrators and police erupted. The tones of these political and social campaigns, which stress the “beautiful women’s hair” and the “right to make them wave in the wind”, are particularly adverse to the Muslim concept of women, even if it should be not completely alien to the traditionally mild Uyghur Islamic religion [66].

What we need to acknowledge is that the condition of women is changing rapidly: In 2010, 41.5 % of women in Xinjiang had a job, up from 14.4 % 10 years ago, according to the first region-wide survey on women’s social status, which was carried out by the regional Women’s Federation and Statistics Bureau in April 2012. By the way, this figure includes both Uyghur and Han women, and data disaggregated by ethnicity still need to be issued. The same can be said for research studies on Uyghur sex workers, a theme on which sociological research has not been conducted yet. At the same time, scholarly articles on medical journals concern the sex workers related diseases, and the measures to prevent and treat them. No disaggregated data according to ethnicity exist yet.

Domestic Violence and Divorce Rate

Domestic violence is a social issue which is mainly related to alcohol abuse and subsequently to divorce rate. According to the Uyghur scholar Zuhayat Ismayil, Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology at Xinjiang University in Urumqi,²⁹ the diffusion of harsh phenomena of domestic violence has been assessed, among Uyghur families, during a round of fieldworks in the region. The problem

²⁹ The following information have been collected during an interview with Prof. Ismayil, a student of the sociologist Ma Rong, on the 30th of April 2011, in the campus of Xinjiang University.

emerged as more serious, and with a deeper social impact, than what the original hypotheses by Zulhayat team would have expected to come true. For 5 years from 2005 to 2010, Zulhayat conducted fieldworks in several selected areas in Xinjiang, the results of which are still “for internal circulation only”. One outcome which is worth noting consists in the acknowledgment that, among Chinese Islamic minorities living in Xinjiang, the phenomenon has been attested as more harsh only among Uyghurs, while for instance among Khazaks and Kyrgyzs, the percentage of women who suffer from episodes of domestic violence perpetrated by their husbands is remarkably low, lower than that of Uyghur women.³⁰ Another outcome worth of mention is that domestic violence among Uyghurs has been registered across all the social classes, from farmers in the rural areas to academics in urban environments. As we already mentioned above, only fieldworks and case studies, often conducted on limited samples, are available on this issue up to now.

In an article by Wang (2011), an in-depth discussion on the origin and causes of the high rate of divorce in the countryside of Southern Xinjiang is presented to the scholarly community: What the author assumes in that social mobility followed to economic development gave birth to a new social group, which is that of the peasant women left aside by husbands who leave the villages to go to work in Inner China or in Central Asian countries. These different life directions which husband and wife take are considered with a sort of Manichean perspective: Women stay in backward and poor environments to look after children and elders, while men have the opportunity to benefit from the culture and modernity of the urban environment. When the separation lasts for too long and the couple cannot reach an agreement on their new conflicting ideas on life, then problems arise and divorce is seen as the easiest way to get out of this kind of situations [63].

A kind of “indirect material” which can help us understanding the seriousness of the problem in Xinjiang are the regulations issued: An article published on *Xinjiang Daily* on 9 December 2008 reports the full text of a deliberation on “Regulations to stop and control domestic violence in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region”, issued by the Autonomous Region People’s Standing Committee. The document introduces a new legal framework according to which domestic violence is officially illegal and must be punished by law, at the same time identifying and giving institutional responsibility to government departments and social establishments which must enforce what is entailed by the new law. Responsibilities and punishments for the violent husband are outlined in a very detailed way, and the bureaux in charge become officially responsible for rescue and punishment measures. The issue of domestic violence on Uyghur women is also discussed in Chinese microblogs, like Weibo and Hexun.³¹ At the same time, in a Master thesis discussed by Li Huigen at Lanzhou University in May 2012 [67], the traditional forms of mutual help and cooperation among women in Uyghur society are understood as strong and effective nets for protecting and supporting the weak social group as that of Uyghur women.

³⁰ This outcome seems not to be in line with the more general studies on Islamic societies in which we can read that violence on women is for some aspects normal and accepted. The issue of the difference checked is still object of debate and very controversial.

³¹ See the following discussions on Weibo—<http://www.weibo.com/zts?k=9673&hasori=1>—and this chat on Douban—<http://www.douban.com/group/topic/30716097/>.

Health Disparities

During the Reform era, more precisely between the 1980s and the 1990s, the healthcare system in China has been interested by structural transformations and a deep reorganisation. The restructuring of this sector changed the deep meaning of healthcare in China, converting it from a service dispensed for free into a commodity delivered under payment. The state did not provide free treatments nor provide full reimbursements to work units and individuals for health expenses anymore. During the 1980s, the health system underwent large-scale structural reforms, becoming very similar to the US healthcare: The flourishing of private health insurance companies, pharmaceutical industries and compulsory medical insurances for those who are not affiliated to any work unit, gave birth to a new business. Nowadays, patients get treated in hospitals only if they can afford it and pay the fees on a daily basis. For instance, in Turpan People's Hospital (*Tulufan Renmin Yiyuan* 吐鲁番人民医院), every early morning, nurses knock at the sickrooms' doors to collect the daily fee from each patient, an amount of money which differs according to the entity of the diseases and to the provision of drugs.³² In 2009, always in Turpan People's Hospital, 500 Rmb (around 65 euros) was the daily fee which a patient needed to pay to treat a simple flu. Those who work for a *danwei* (单位, work unit) have part of medical expenses refunded (from small to a bigger percentages, which can reach 90 %, depending on the richness of the *danwei* and on the type of contract), while those who do not depend on any work unit, like individual farmers, need to turn to their personal funding. The ratio beyond the modern Chinese medical system consists in the fact that hospitals need to pay doctors and nurses with the money of patients. On this basis, those who work in *danwei* can easily cope with these situations, while those who do not usually do not dare to go to hospitals, and prefer to choose self-treatment and turn to pharmacies. As I already mentioned, they might even address themselves to non-qualified and often non-authorised structures, with untrained medical personnel.

As a result, farmers and those who belong to the weakest sections of society are penalised, and the healthcare system in the Chinese countryside represents a problematic issue and a tough challenge for Beijing.

As it is easily deductible, Uyghur farmers, especially in particularly poor areas (where the annual income can even be 700 Rmb a year for a four members family), are deeply affected by this economic and social transformations. Since the majority of them cannot afford to enter hospitals, it became a common practice to turn to pharmacies and choose self-treatment. These problems in basic healthcare services in Xinjiang have a deep impact on the regional economic and social development, since people cannot spend money before having saved enough for health insurances and for the education expenses for their children. Life expectancy in Xinjiang, attested at 65.98 for men and 69.14 for women in 2000,³³ is still today the fifth worst in China, following Tibet, Guizhou, Qinghai and Yunnan. Back in 1982, infant mortality among Uyghurs was as

³² [7] on the interaction between pharmaceutical companies and hospitals, and the corruption dynamics which underly agreements and provisions. Moreover, since hospitals pay the medical personnel through the payments of patients, as a consequence prices of health services are high, especially for that part of the population which does not belong to any work unit.

³³ China Statistical Yearbook 2005. The most recent data available for Xinjiang are those of 2000, while for the whole country data have been released for the year 2004.

high as 45.9 %, while in 2008, it has been attested to 161 deaths per 100,000 live births, the second highest registered in China.³⁴

A major measure which has been implemented by the authorities to support very poor families is the introduction of the *dibao* 低保, a “minimum insurance” of a few hundreds RMB per month which is distributed to the poor families in the countryside [34]. Apparently, being assistentialist in nature, this policy is not helping too much. At the same time, for the central government, it is the easiest way to start facing the problem, since *dibao* is a measure which does not constitute a permanent expenditure for the state, and it can be revoked once it starts to become a burden for the state finances. Eventually, it seems that it does not represent a solution to the whole problem.

The seriousness of the health problems in Xinjiang is represented by the recurrent outbreaks of Polio, the most recent one being occurred the summer of 2011. The interesting data about it is that the virus enters the region via Pakistan, only hitting the Uyghur population in Southern Xinjiang. This could be due to bad hygiene conditions in the area, as well as to the fact that the vaccination, for different reasons, does not cover the whole population. As a response to the last outbreak in 2011, the local government in the hit areas implemented measures like medical education campaigns and compulsory vaccination for both children and adults.

Brenda Schuster, in her article “Gaps in the Silk Road: An Analysis of Population Health Disparities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China” (2009), assesses that major health indicators outline severe differences between Hans and Uyghurs, these health disparities clearly following ethnic lines. The author analyses different factors: residency, infant mortality rate, education, unemployment and life expectancy. Her conclusion is that, for all these indicators, Uyghurs are in a much penalised situation than Hans. In an attempt to identify the causes underlying these conditions, she realises that different socio-economic, cultural and historical factors, related to ethnicity, can be considered responsible for the health gap. She then acknowledges that lack of education, low income, cultural attitudes about gender, group-specific psychological stress and the socio-economic and demographic changes of the past 60 years could be the major factors. While the findings of Schuster analysis are clear, she acknowledges the fact that different research methodologies, an unavoidable bias and the choice of variables could have led to a different picture.³⁵

To complete the whole picture, we need to mention that the region has several natural and endemic problems which affect, in particular, drinking water. According to data provided by the researcher Erika Scull in the paper titled “Environmental Health Challenges in Xinjiang” [71], written for the China Environmental Health Project, the low levels of iodine caused a high rate of iodine deficiency disorders among the local population. The author writes that in 1995, goitres were endemic, with an occurrence of 43.29 % rate among children between the 8 and 10 years old. When UNICEF–China collaboration started in 2000, and the use of iodised salt increased, infant goitre rate drops to below 15 %. As a matter of fact, Xinjiang’s poorest residents still suffer from these disorders, mainly because iodised salt remains not affordable for them. To cope with this problem and to make an effort to meet the Universal Sal Iodination goal set by

³⁴ [52], p. 434

³⁵ [52], pp. 438–439

the UN in 1990 (which fix at 90 % the percentage of households which have to consume iodised salt), the government started to distribute iodine-releasing devices for cooking water.

The presence of arsenic and of high levels of fluoride are both causing serious health problems, including skin irregularities, fatigue, hearth problems and cancer [20]. Xinjiang is ranked among the first five provinces with the highest proportions of excessive arsenic, caused by natural geological conditions, in village wells. The substance was first discovered in 1983 in the village of Kuitun in the Zhungar Basin. In the mid-1980s, water with low levels of arsenic was provided for the villagers, but the mortality rates for cancer and health problems remain abnormally high. Arsenic has also been linked to reduced intellectual functions in exposed children. Moreover, while the maximum level of fluoride allowed in China is 1 mg/l, in Kuitun and other areas, it can reach 21.5 mg/l. High levels of fluoride can cause arthritis and tooth decay, and can impact children's physical and mental growth. In addition, it has been found that fluoride can have detrimental health defects when combined with low iodine levels. A study conducted on children in areas of Xinjiang with low iodine levels and high fluoride levels revealed that fluoride can exacerbate neurological disorders caused by iodine deficiency, including mental retardation, hearing loss and degenerative effects on the central nervous system.

Environmental Degradation

Xinjiang is a unique arid ecosystem with an independent and self-balanced hydrological cycle, which means that the total volume of water in the region is basically stable, and at the same time, it is particularly fragile and vulnerable to human impact. The region is surrounded entirely by mountains, with the Tianshan (Tengritagh) range dividing the province into two basins: the Zungar Basin in the North and the Tarim in the South. The larger and more populated of the two, the Tarim Basin, is one of the driest places on earth. Its only water sources are the melting glaciers of the surrounding mountains: snow from the Tianshan mountains melts to form China's longest inland river, the Tarim. In the last decades, the region became one of the unhealthiest areas in China: The growing negative impact of air and water pollution, desertification, the overall ecological damage caused by nuclear experiments conducted until 1996, and by a rapid highly polluting industrialisation process, all constitute important factors endangering health and affecting the development of Xinjiang society. A comprehensive study conducted by scholars and scientists at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences,³⁶ based on indicators related to population growth, health status, education, natural conditions, environmental pollution, economics and healthcare, shows how the region became the fifth having the worst environment and health indices on a national scale. Interesting reports on environmental problems in the region can be downloaded from the website: www.chinadialogue.net, by the Chinese environmentalist Ma Jun.

Urumqi, the capital of the region, in the *Annual Nationwide Urban Environmental Management and Regulation Report* released by China's Ministry of Environmental Protection for the year 2007, and in a 2008 central government report, was listed as one

³⁶ Wang et al. (2004), quoted in [71].

of the most polluted cities in China, with severe air pollution and low quality water. A 2008 report by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) underscored how Urumqi's severe air pollution was contributing to a high mortality rate from respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, and malignant tumours. A Sino-Italian Cooperation Program for Environmental Protection allocated 500,000 Euros to monitor the level of air pollution in the city.³⁷ Urumqi heavy air pollution is not surprising when I consider that the city is the number one for coal consumption in China, without taking into account the fact that Xinjiang provides 40.6 % of the total national coal supply. This abundance as a natural resource makes coal to represent 67 % of Urumqi energy use, with a per capita coal consumption in the city which is four times higher than the national average, the highest in the whole country. With the increasing number of coal-fired power plants in the city—its coal use increased by 47.8 % between 2001 and 2006—the overall air quality has been rated as grade III, the worst in the national scale of air quality standards. Shihezi, the second largest city in Xinjiang, has three large chemical plants in its immediate outskirts, and the air quality is heavily impacted, together with the health of the population. Factors impacting the air quality in the city are objects of analysis for an increasing number of Chinese environmental scientists and scholars, who mainly point out to coal and sand storms, together with the polluting factors coming from Shihezi chemical plants [77].

The rapid increase in population over the past 3 decades represents a more and more heavy burden for the limited resources in the region (only in 2001, around 500 Han Chinese went each week to Xinjiang looking for a job). Even if data on migration are a sensitive issue, it is believed that the scale of migration waves is today in the order of the hundreds of thousand people a week. This demographic pressure makes health services and natural resources like water become a social and economic issue; for this reason, Chinese scholars started to concern about environment in Xinjiang, with more and more studies and alarming analyses being published on the topic.³⁸ The history of the Lop Nor desert became an issue covered by international media: the Lop lake, in the middle of the homonymous desert and once surrounded by a flourishing oasis, source of nourishment and business activities for the bordering villages centred on fishing and agriculture, now disappeared. Desertification due to intensive agriculture in the surroundings is deemed as the main factor causing the death of the oasis and the subsequent migration of all the villagers to other parts of Xinjiang. A more recent environmental problem concerns lake Aibi in Northern Xinjiang: According to the reports of Xinhua News Agency, the lake has been shrinking at more than 15 mi²/year because of encroaching sands. Unrestrained land reclamation and flood irrigation complete the picture, and according to local officials, growing desertification and sandstorm problems have disrupted local people's lives, their agricultural and business activities. Experts assessed that about 5.5 million tons of sand and salt are blown away each year, reaching as far as Beijing. Transmission lines are often interrupted for salt dust, and cattle deaths tripled in recent years [74].

Water scarcity has historically been one of the biggest problems in Xinjiang. Between the 1950s and 1980s, the region saw a huge decrease in the total surface area of its lakes, from 9700 to 4953 km². Climate-related drought and human activities are

³⁷ <http://cleanairinitiative.org/portal/node/396> (accessed on 5 December 2012)

³⁸ [75, 43; an updated bibliography can be read in [71].

the two main causes for the shrinking of Xinjiang Lakes. In the late 1950s, 13 dams were built on the upper reaches of the Kongque River for irrigation purposes. By 1964, Lake Lop Nor, which was fed by this river and its tributaries, completely dried up. Since the whole region has naturally salty water, it also faces problems with water salinisation. There are only three freshwater lakes in Xinjiang—out of a total of 139. Over the past few decades, the salinity of the region's lakes has increased as many lakes have begun to dry up [70]. As lake water depths have decreased, the proportion of salt in the water and alkalinity have likewise increased. As an effect of climate change, the melting glaciers will increase the amount of available water in the region's cities, a factor which may encourage further development, especially of water-intensive industries. The increase in water flow is expected to last for about 40 years, after which the region's economy will need to be re-adjusted to the new conditions. Ultimately, if nothing is done to counter climate change, within one century, the glaciers in the region may disappear. Since Xinjiang's reliance on glacial water is one of the highest in Asia, the disappearance of these glaciers would be catastrophic for the 20 million people living in the region. Landslides and floods are also a threat to the peoples of Xinjiang.

Since the 1950s, transfers of pioneers from Inner China and large-scale land reclamation plans started to be implemented: Between 1950 and 1970, the population of the XJPCC increased from less than 20,000 to 420,000 people, while today, their residents became almost 3 million. The region experienced substantial environmental pressure when the demographic increase led to a fast growth of cultivated land, whose area almost doubled between 1950 and 2000. As a consequence, the Tarim River's downstream zones started to receive a lower quality and quantity of water. By 1980s, this large-scale agricultural venture shortened the Tarim by 320 km, severely degrading land and water in its lower reaches, with a serious impact on human health.³⁹ This has been one of the factors causing an overall migration of the local population from the area, in the 1990s.

Before 1980, grain production, including rice, constituted 60 to 80 % of the cultivated land in the Tarim. By the 1990s, cash crop production replaced grain, increasing to more than 70 %. Economic incentives and water scarcity were the main two reasons for the switch to cash crops. At the same time, when China became one of the global leaders in textile production and export during the 1990s, Xinjiang experienced a boom in cotton production. The historically high cotton prices led most of the land cultivators in the Tarim Basin to switch to the labour-intensive activity of growing cotton, which in turn led to population growth, bad land degradation and increased water scarcity. Large sections of unused land were then converted into cotton fields, which often entailed a land reclamation and leaching process,⁴⁰ due to the high alkalinity of previously considered unusable plots. The leaching process required that large volumes of water were drawn from the river and then re-directed back into it, thereby reducing the quantity and quality of water arriving downstream. In response to the water-scarcity problem, China plans to divert up to 10 % of the water volume of the Irtysh and Ili Rivers, waters on which the Central Asia neighbours, particularly Kazakhstan, heavily rely upon. World Bank projects have also been implemented to try to cope with water scarcity.

³⁹ Several WB projects have been implemented to restore and protect the Tarim ecosystem <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/2007/05/29/restoring-chinas-tarim-river-basin>.

⁴⁰ Data on desertification, alkalinity and leaching processes have been kindly provided by Dr. Uwe Schleiff, who participated as consultant for salinity and alkalinity problems to the KfW external experts mission in the framework of the Sino-German Poverty Alleviation Programme Xinjiang (August–September 2012).

With almost 45 % of its total land area occupied by deserts, Xinjiang is currently severely affected by desertification [69]. In 2004, Xinjiang's deserts were estimated to be expanding at a rate of 10,700 ha/year, an improvement over previous years, when an expansion of 38,400 ha/year was registered. The central and local governments have invested huge capitals to cope with this problem. Between 2000 and 2004, 1.43 million ha of trees were planted, while forest increased from 1.92 to 2.1 %. One government campaign of 2004 has invested 27 million dollars into methane gas facilities, using animal and human waste for cooking and heating fuel, which reduced the habit of the communities to cut trees for firewood.

In 2009, about 10 % of Xinjiang's rural population was using methane⁴¹ while also being encouraged to plant trees through government campaigns to control desertification. In 2007 [11], China's central government announced plans to reduce desert areas of 7.6 million hectares by 2015, through investments aimed at planting trees, training professional forestry staff, setting up monitoring stations and improving irrigation systems. The central government will cover 80 % of the planned 2.46 billion dollars in investments, while the remaining 20 % will be covered by local governments. Over the past few years, Xinjiang received funding also from foreign governments, including Japan and South Korea, to reduce desertification. Most of Xinjiang's desertification is caused by excessive farming and over-grazing. Local people's use of wood for fuel also contributes to desertification, as trees act as a wind break, retain moisture and prevent erosion. Before the campaign to encourage the use of methane, the average rural family used to burn 500 kg of wood per year. Experts consider impacts of climate change—particularly reduced rainfall—as another challenge to the halt of desertification. Ecological consequences of desertification are cropland infertility, drinking water shortages and sandstorms. Desertification can also affect human health by increasing respiratory diseases and eye irritations. In Khotan, there are over 300 days/year of sand-filled wind, which are leading to a marked increase in respiratory problems. Furthermore, due to desertification and encroaching sand, Qira County residents had to relocate three times.

Nuclear Tests

Between 1964 and 1996, the Chinese government used to carry out nuclear testing in the Lop Nor area in Eastern Xinjiang. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported that 45 official nuclear tests led to radiation poisoning which caused 210,000 estimated deaths. However, it has been assessed that secret nuclear testing has been going on, with serious effects on the health of the people in the surrounding areas [37]. An investigative work by the London daily *The Independent* revealed that in the areas surrounding the Lop Nor nuclear test site, the cancer rate that is 35 % higher than in the rest of China—leukaemia, tumours and birth defects such as cleft palates—have a higher rate than the average in the country. An anonymous doctor claimed that during the testing period, 80 % of the children he was visiting had cleft palates. The effects of the radioactivity of the site on people living around the lake have been reported by the Uyghur doctor Enver Tohti, who participated in a *Channel Four* documentary on the issue, collaborated to the editing of a book on the topic [56], and is now living in

⁴¹ Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2011

London from where he moves around the world to speak about his experience as a doctor in the Cancer Department of the First Hospital in Urumqi. When he was still working there during the 1990s, he found out that cancer rates in the region were 30 to 35 % higher than the national average. The Head of the London section of the World Uyghur Congress, Tohti, is currently dealing with organ transplanting from live bodies of convicts, something which he has been forced to do when he was still living in Xinjiang.

The last news about the Chinese nuclear experiments sites in Xinjiang is that, after the establishment of new theme parks in Dunhuang, Kaifeng and other parts of China, the Beijing authorities will be giving access to the public to the deserted nuclear experiment site where scientists developed the country's first atomic bomb in 1964, the remote Malan atomic base in Lop Nor. The costs of this "requalification project" amount to six million RMB, around 732,000 EUROs (BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-19958011>).

Education

Just until the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the traditional channels of education were strictly connected with religion and local Islam. Islamic schools and *mazar*, the sacred places where important religious figures are buried, were the typical venues to get an education. The materials and different methodologies adopted are now still object of research, and it is difficult to piece together all the information due to the lack of available sources (the major part of written sources in Uyghur language have been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution) [55].

The Chinese national education policy currently requires that minority children learn their mother tongue at school, while all children have to learn the national language: Mandarin. Until the late 1990s, in Uyghur primary schools, the teaching language was Uyghur, with Mandarin only taught as the second language. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in all autonomous regions, where the majority of the population belongs to different ethnicities than the Hans, a complex system of bilingual education has been established. In 2002, a new bilingual education policy has been introduced by the Xinjiang Regional Education Bureau: Mandarin became the language of instruction, while the mother tongue was taught as second language. While the declared goal of this policy shift was the improvement of the standard of Mandarin among minority students, in order to make them more competitive in their work place, Arianne M. Dwyer [75] gives a very critical assessment of these new measures, underlying the political goals of Beijing in encouraging education in Mandarin. The author assumes that monolingual education, the covert middle-term aim of the Ministry of Education, is perceived as a "cultural attack" by Uyghurs and can be understood as an effective measure for quick assimilation.

The implementation of the policy was initially slow. In 2002, in most rural areas and in many cities apart from Urumqi, just a few minority teachers had good Mandarin skills; thus, the mother tongue continued to be the main language of instruction. Mandarin was used more in urban minority schools where it was easier to find qualified teachers. To hasten the implementation of the policy, the government began upgrading the Mandarin level of established teachers through ongoing learning programmes,

together with sending minority teachers with a good Mandarin level to rural schools. In 2005, Mandarin became the language of instruction, in line with the new requirements by the Regional Education Bureau. Since then, the pace of policy implementation has continued to vary, depending on the capacity to teach Mandarin effectively, or on how the policy was interpreted by local government officials.

In today's Xinjiang, there are three kinds of primary school: the "Han school", with the majority of children being Han, and a small but increasing number of students belonging to minorities, with all subjects taught in Mandarin by Han teachers. The second type is the "combined school", attended by Han and minority children who can study in minority languages just some optional subjects, with all the other classes taught in Mandarin. The third type is the "ethnic school", the so-called "Uyghur schools", where 100 % of students belong to minorities. In this third school, the mother tongue is learned as a subject, and the rest of the classes are in Mandarin.

The "Han schools" registered a rapid increase of enrolments in the past few years, mainly due to the increase of Han people living in Xinjiang and to the choice of a growing number of Uyghur families, mainly belonging to the Uyghur bourgeoisie and middle class, who choose to send their children to Han schools, since they assume that a fluent level of Mandarin and an education in Mandarin would help children to access good universities, find suitable jobs and raise to high positions in Chinese society. The second type of schools is mainly attended by minority nationals who want to not only study their mother tongue but also be fluent in Mandarin. The Uyghur schools are mainly attended by Uyghurs who do not have any other choice because this kind of school is the only one available in the surroundings, or who believe that an education in Uyghur is more suitable. According to the majority of Uyghurs we have been talking to on the issue, Han schools are much better than Uyghur schools in terms of teaching level, since the latter are imbued with propaganda activities, and educational standards are lower. This is due to several different factors, one of them being the fact that Uyghur schools are located in remote countryside areas, where only young and not-experienced teachers and educators are willing to work.

The link between human capital, economic growth and development is underlined by Wang Jinbo [73], who argues that investment in an education which is competitive on the job market is a fundamental factor of growth and development. The authors assume that the gap between Xinjiang and the Eastern part of China does concern not only the economy but also education, which should be able to train, attract and retain talents. In this framework, in the year 2000, the Xinjiang Class, *Xinjiang Neidi Gaozhong Ban* 新疆内地高中班, has been implemented. This special program consists in selecting the best Uyghur middle school students, send them to study in prestigious high schools in Inner and coastal China, allow them to attend the best universities and employ them in Xinjiang.⁴²

Policies on education in minority areas are then still not consolidated and under discussion: In fact, they are constantly revised and reframed on the basis of the specific situations, with pilot projects being implemented all over the region. For instance, since September 2007, all minority children in the city of Ghulja/Yining are required to learn Mandarin from grade 1 and do not receive any teaching in their mother tongue. These children will continue to learn in Mandarin as they progress through primary school

⁴² An exhaustive overview of this programme, including its outcomes, is provided by [22].

and will get some rudiments of their mother tongue only from grade 4. Since 2009, in other areas of Xinjiang, including Urumqi Municipality, primary teachers use Mandarin as language of instruction, and minority children will have between 3 and 4 h/week of mother tongue taught as a subject. According to Strawbridge [76], education authorities in Xinjiang refer to the use of Mandarin as the language of instruction in minority schools by as “bilingual” education. In other words, bilingual teachers are minority teachers who teach subjects in Mandarin and are required not to use mother tongue in their lessons. The widespread implementation of the bilingual policy has increased pressure on children to have a basic understanding of Mandarin from the time they start primary school. This led to Mandarin being widely taught in pre-schools and even kindergartens, to prepare children for school life in a second language environment.

From 2007, education authorities have sought to further improve the standard of Mandarin in primary schools by stepping up language training for teachers. This involved programmes to send minority teachers with good Mandarin skills to courses for up to 2 years to improve their skills in spoken and written Mandarin. Temporarily, these teachers were replaced by young graduates from Mandarin language institutions who have good language skills but no experience in teaching. At the same time, minority teachers in ethnic and combined schools with limited Mandarin were replaced by graduates with good Mandarin but no teaching skills.⁴³

The Impact on Minority Schools

The pragmatic approach towards education for minorities adopted by Ma Rong (2006), which advocates the combination of the interests of ethnic minorities for their cultural heritage and the interest of national development and integration, has guided the work of the central government on the issue. The implementation of the bilingual language policy throughout the region had a deep impact on the composition and status of the different types of schools in Xinjiang. Parents are moving their children from classes in combined schools that provide mother tongue lessons into classes that are taught in Mandarin only. The increasing status of Mandarin has been enhanced by the fact that many parents who are government officials are leading the trend to enrol their children in Han schools. As experienced teachers in minority schools were replaced by unqualified graduates with good Mandarin skills, according to the authorities of the Education Bureau, the quality of teaching, particularly in ethnic schools, declined further. This has contributed to the movement of minority children into classes in which Mandarin only is used. There are now declining numbers of children attending ethnic schools and fewer minority children studying mother tongue in combined schools. It is likely that, within a few years, Mandarin will be the only language of instruction for minority children in many combined schools if the trend in urban schools is of any indication. As the number of classes providing mother tongue instruction reduces and more Mandarin is used in schools, mother tongue teachers are being retired or moved to other roles in schools. According to the survey made by Strawbridge [76] for *Save the Children*, already 21 % of minority children with which the authors work are no longer learning mother tongue. This is likely to increase to 40 % or more in the next years.

⁴³ Educational enrollment and attainment disparities in China following ethnic lines are analysed in [25].

Conclusive Remarks: Uneven Regional Development

Referring to the dimensions set by the UNDP for the calculation of the health, education, living standards (HDI), to its related indicators (life expectancy at birth, mean years of schooling, expected years of schooling, gross national income per capita) and to an hybrid set of criteria which we consider “place-specific” (like alcohol abuse, domestic violence and women conditions), the available literature, together with our fieldwork outcomes, outlines a situation of neat disparities between the Han and the Uyghur populations living in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The trend over a 10-year span of time, from 1999 to 2009, is stable, with part of the Uyghur population which can enjoy the new opportunities (mainly an emerging tiny middle class) and another part which is seeing its life standards gradually worsening (mainly farmers and migrant workers). Ethnic affiliation of groups and individuals, originally a socio-political construction [8, 9, 14], turned to be a commonly accepted de facto rigid classification for individual and group identities, a consolidated label with a specific meaning in society. Access to resources and enjoyment of services come out to be strictly associated with it.

It has already been assessed that Xinjiang is a fast-growing region, where job opportunities are increasing and wealth is more and more widespread, reaching the remotest areas, and where substantial investments from the central government and SOEs are allegedly aimed at improving life standards of the people, together with environmental conditions and infrastructures. According to Kuznets theory of the U-shaped relationship between development and inequality, these fast growth and developmental drive shall produce a “spillover effect” in the long term, which should lead to the inclusion of all social actors in the new developed environment, entailing an equally distributed across society access to resources and wealth. Up to now, remarkable inequalities still exist, with the Southern part of the region, mainly rural and populated for the 80 % by Uyghurs, which is suffering from severe economic and social problems, and the Han-dominated and mainly urban Northern part, which is apparently almost exclusively benefitting from the incoming new wealth. The still very complex situation in the poorest areas of Southern Xinjiang, matched with socio-economic measures which are unpopular and often unfitting,⁴⁴ is leaving room to the feeling that this development model is imposed from the top, a distant and alien centre which is mainly concerned about its own interests and too much engaged in fulfilling requests and claims of the more compliant Han population. This sense “having been left behind” is common among the broad Uyghur population. A major problem which has almost always been mentioned in the interviews during our fieldworks is the lack of “capacitations”, which means that Uyghurs have the neat perception of being unable to climb the social ladder, no matter how much effort they put in their studies and works. Obstacles are always perceived as too tough. Among those who have been interviewed, a frequent reason of complaint is the impossibility to move forward in working and educational environments, due to the presence of Han counterparts who represent unfair competitors, mainly due to language and educational factors.

⁴⁴ *Dibao*, measures to cope with religious belief, education and unemployment, are just a few of the contested measures implemented in Southern Xinjiang.

The increasing local discontent, together with the perception of being considered as “second-class citizens”, erupted in large demonstrations of Uyghur students, migrant workers and common people in July 2009, covering with blood the streets of Urumqi. The clashes which followed left almost 200 people dead and hundreds of casualties. These data have been officially released by the central and regional authorities, and they also highlighted the fact that the majority of those killed was of Han ethnicity. For the whole autumn 2009, tensions continued, with frequent violent outbreaks in different parts of the region, making the international community question how much the area is really stable. President Hu Jintao was forced to return to China from Italy, where he was on an official visit for a tour which included several European countries in occasion of the G8 assembly [68].

The interpretations which followed the riots range from an alleged involvement of terrorist groups, the existence and the extent of whom are difficult to assess,⁴⁵ to the more “traditional” narrative proposed by the Chinese central authorities which consists in arguing that Xinjiang is a harmoniously developing area, where peoples of all the nationalities are cooperating for the construction of a better society. The problems of terrorism, religious extremism and separatism are charged on foreign forces, like the US government and the US-financed WUC. The 2009 riots are thus ascribed to those forces, supported by Uyghurs émigrées who oppose the central government for power dynamics.⁴⁶ According to a US diplomat⁴⁷ who prefers to remain anonymous, the Chinese government is insisting with a certain strength that a terrorist threat really exists on its territory and is allegedly looking for support from foreign countries which, like the USA, are particularly sensitive to the same problem. This notwithstanding the “view from inside” provided by the local population mainly consists in the perception of being left behind, which means not having been consulted nor included, in the new developmental push interesting the region. For instance, the thesis of Prof. Qarluq is that the outbreak of the 2009 riots has mainly been triggered by contrasts concerning the transfers of Uyghur peasant workers, planned and managed by Beijing, from the poor areas of Southern Xinjiang to the factories of Inner and coastal China.⁴⁸ The discourse proposed by Prof. Ilham Tohti consists in assuming that the constant discrimination of the Uyghur population by the central government and the Hans is the reason why Uyghurs took to the streets.

A valid interpretative approach is provided by Micheal Hechter and his theory of internal colonialism and cultural division of labour [28]. In his work, Hechter assumes that in internally colonised societies, class struggle has been replaced, and in a way disguised, by ethnic struggle and discrimination. This situation can be assessed in Xinjiang, where a clear link between ethnicity and standard of life exists: The rich, powerful and wealthy are Hans, while the worse-off are the Uyghurs. At the same time, these class/ethnic dynamics reproduce themselves in the Uyghur community, where, for instance, corrupted officials exploit poor Uyghur farmers.

⁴⁵ An informative but controversial work on the issue is in [48]

⁴⁶ This is the narrative provided by Prof. Yang Shenming during one of his classes at Minzu University of China in March 2012.

⁴⁷ Interviewed in August 2012 in Beijing

⁴⁸ Prof. Qarluq illustrated his thesis in a lecture he gave at Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” on the 7th of November 2012.

To summarise, the assessment of the “human geography” of intra-regional inequality outlines a pattern where a certain socio-economic status is associated to a certain ethnicity. Ethnic categories get a kind of concreteness, they are written on identity cards and personal documents, different laws and regulations entail different ethnicities, and what comes out is an over-ethnicised society [9].

The question now is how the current development is going to impact the peoples of Xinjiang? With a more urbanised and industrial society, is it not possible that Uyghurs will necessarily be involved in the decision-making process? Since this is not happening yet, which are the dynamics underlying disparities? These questions cannot be answered only employing official data and scholarly texts; this is why we choose to go on the field, since only those who are part of this society could provide us with a better understanding of the situation.

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