

The Xinjiang Story: Securing People's Livelihood and Greening the Desert

by William Jones

Jan. 17—Given the intensity of the Western media campaign that depicts the strategic Chinese western province of Xinjiang as something akin to a police state, it is necessary to report some features of the province, its government, and its people, some of which were garnered by this author on a visit to Xinjiang in December 2018. While Chinese reporters have been scouring Xinjiang recently to be able to report the truth about the region, its importance, its development and the real lives of its people, the Western media are still determined to continue to repeat their false narrative.



Schiller Institute/Christine Bierre

The White Mosque in Urumqi, the capital city of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the far northwest of China, in July 2019.

A Eurasian Crossroads

Xinjiang has been a part of China for centuries. This border region came to be of central importance for China during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), the first period of the ancient Silk Road. It is home to a great number of ethnic groups and diverse religions, but it has never been an independent state, and the much-touted notion of an “East Turkestan” state has never existed in reality.

Particularly since the Tang Dynasty (618 A.D.- 907 A.D.), this “Western region” has been under the administrative control of China. During the 18th and 19th centuries, it was an area of conflict among the Great Powers, namely, China, Russia and Great Britain, and while the question has long been settled between China and Russia, the British have never ceased using the “Xinjiang issue” in order to create problems for China. While there were attempts earlier by Turkey to create an Islamic Turkic Republic in the region, this never

proved a viable option, and has now been put aside. And although there had been some attempts by the old Russian Empire to incorporate the region as a part of its expansion into Central Asia in the 1800s, Xinjiang remained a part of the Chinese Empire.

With the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911, Xinjiang was again declared a part of China. And while the disruption of the Second World War and the Japanese occupation of much of northern China served to weaken central administrative control, the region was not again brought under firm Chinese control until 1949.

The immense region of Xinjiang—roughly the size of Great Britain, France, Germany, and Spain combined—

with its 1.66 million square kilometers, is divided roughly on an East-West axis by the Tian Shan Mountains. The northern part of Xinjiang, the Dzungarian Basin, where the capital Urumqi is located, has a more moderate and humid climate, with the fertile plains of the Irtysh and Yili Rivers running through it. South of the Tian Shan range lies the Tarim Basin, an arid region, which includes the massive Taklamakan Desert.

The northern region has benefited greatly from the establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with the inland ports of Urumqi and Ili, bordering Kazakhstan, serving as major centers along the BRI route. The poorer southern portion of Xinjiang, which has been the most afflicted by the spread of radical Islam and by radical terrorist groups, has not fully reaped the same economic benefits in spite of major efforts by the Chinese

government to provide irrigation for farming and grazing, including the major Tarim River Basin project, which succeeded in reviving that prime source of water for the region after years of increasing desertification. A [railroad](#) has now been cut through the southern desert region as well, and will provide more commerce with Pakistan along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a key element of the Belt and Road Initiative.

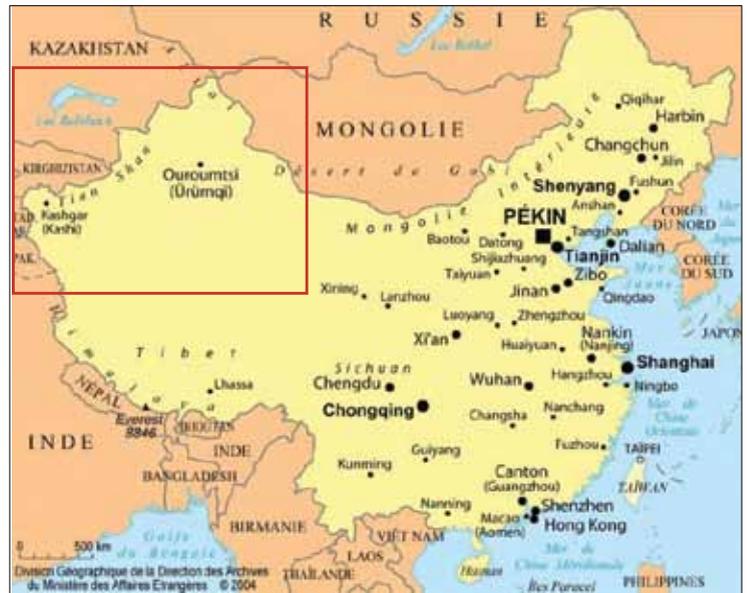
Xinjiang has many religions, including Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and the Eastern Orthodox Church. It has 24,800 venues for religious activities, including mosques, churches, and Buddhist and Taoist temples, with 29,300 religious staff. Among these, there are 24,400 mosques, most of them built by the Chinese government; 59 Buddhist temples; and one Taoist temple. There are churches or meeting grounds for Protestants (227), Catholics (26), and Orthodox Christians (3). In the course of development of the province, many of the mosques have been provided with running water and electricity, wi-fi, and internet connections.

Spread of Terrorism from the West

The wave of insurgencies in the Middle East and Afghanistan in the 1990s, particularly in the aftermath of the Iraq War, also spread to Xinjiang from neighboring Pakistan, and has served as a catalyst for the proliferation of fundamentalist versions of Islam. It also served to revive the largely moribund East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM), which had been around for over a century, but which received a new lease on life through British patronage and then through its collaboration with Al-Qaeda and ISIS. A television network promoting Uyghur independence, Istiqlal, has been operating in Turkey for some time, although with its growing ties to China, Turkey has been very reticent about giving overt support to Uyghur independence.

The World Uyghur Congress, a key umbrella group for Uyghur dissidents, established in Munich in 2004, has become the darling of the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The NED was founded in 1983

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China



by the U.S. Congress as a “non-governmental” organization to give it greater leverage in pushing for the type of “democratic” changes in other nations that were in line with U.S. policy. Since then, the NED has been very active in most color revolutions, including President Obama’s “Arab Spring.”

The World Uyghur Congress has brought together many of the dissident Uyghur groups in the diaspora around the idea of splitting Xinjiang from China. During the wars and insurgencies in the Middle East—in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere—Uyghur ETIM activists were filtered into the Middle East with the help of some of the dissident networks for terrorist training. Uyghur units participated in much of the heavy fighting in Syria.

Many of those fighters were later infiltrated back into Xinjiang in order to create local networks of terror on the ground. Virginia State Senator Richard Black, who has visited Syria several times, reported on the existence of extremist Uyghur terrorist cells in Syria, which were playing a major role in the insurgency against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and represented, in his opinion, some of the most fanatical proponents of radical jihad, creating a major threat for the Chinese authorities.

A March 2019 [White Paper](#) published by the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, titled “The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang,” notes that there have been thousands of terrorist attacks in Xinjiang since the 1990s. In 1997 an attack in Yining killed 7 people and wounded 188.

But what provided a “9/11 effect” on Chinese authorities was a major coordinated and multi-targeted attack in Urumqi, the capital, on July 5, 2009, in which 197 people were killed and 1,700 wounded. It was in the light of this extensive operation—which, like many others, was clearly coordinated by forces outside Xinjiang—that authorities were put on high alert.

Then, in 2013, there was a car attack on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, just outside central government headquarters. While only a few people were killed, a tape of the event went viral on the ETIM websites as proof that the terrorists could strike even in the heart of China’s capital. And in 2014, a lone assassin armed with a machete descended on the Kunming Railway Station, killing 31 people and wounding 140. In none of these attacks did the terrorists distinguish between Han Chinese and Uyghurs. All were targeted.

The White Paper also notes that Chinese authorities have disrupted 1,588 violent terrorist gangs in Xinjiang since 2014. While ringleaders and major offenders who are responsible for extremist attacks are severely punished (as are repeat offenders), minor offenders are dealt with leniently. But the real key to government policy has been its de-radicalization efforts, that is, a pro-active policy of eliminating or reducing the spread of radical Islamist ideology. There have been no major attacks in the last three years; China’s policy seems to be very successful.

While Islam, like the other religions, is freely practiced in China—and many Muslims are playing important roles in Chinese society—the government is attempting to reduce the influence of radical Islam, which in Xinjiang, as in other Muslim regions, is attempting to spread its sinister influence. Before the spate of terrorist actions in the 1990s, the members of the various religious and ethnic groups in Xinjiang lived in relative harmony. With the growth of terrorism, however, it was necessary for the authorities to monitor more closely the growing influence of radical Islam.

Education, Training, Jobs

Radical Islam among the Uyghurs has objectives similar to those of Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic groups. Women will again be veiled, education—other than religious education—will be abolished, technology (except for that useful in conducting jihad) shunned, and people will be relegated to conditions similar to those of the pre-industrial era. A modernizing China is therefore seen as a deadly threat to this radical ideology.

The government’s education centers have provided an alternative for people who might otherwise be attracted to such a mindless ideology, by giving them the tools they need to function in a modernizing China, i.e., job skills, language skills, an understanding of the nation’s laws, and of their rights and privileges. The purpose was not to punish, but to help people become pro-



Schiller Institute/Christine Bierre

Learning machine-sewing to get better jobs, at the Gaochang vocational center in Turpan, a city in the eastern part of Xinjiang, on July 12, 2019.

ductive members of society and provide them with the ability to support their families.

Two members of the Schiller Institute had an opportunity to [visit](#) the region in the past year, visiting one of these centers in Gaochang in the Turpan Prefecture. As one of them noted, people in the center feel that they are getting the training they need to play a valuable role in Xinjiang society. And this has been generally confirmed by members of the numerous foreign delegations that have been invited in to visit these centers.

Exposing the Media Lies

Over the last few weeks, Chinese media, in particular, China’s English-language network, the China Global Television Network (CGTN), has been [travel-](#)



Schiller Institute/Christine Bierre

Learning life-saving procedures at the Gaochang vocational center, on July 12, 2019.

ing all over Xinjiang, talking with people who have graduated from these vocational training centers. CGTN reports that these graduates are now leading successful lives in various professions, Those talked about included an artist, a real estate agent, and a woman operating a textile factory. Having learned Chinese as well as their native ethnic language, they now have a greater opportunity in sharing in the economic growth that has been brought to the region by the Belt and Road Initiative. And on December 9 last year, Xinjiang Governor Shohrat Zakir announced that all the people at these centers had graduated.

The Western media hype, led by *The New York Times*, also accuses Chinese authorities of “forcing”

children to attend boarding schools. CGTN and other media conducted numerous interviews with some of the children, who were, in fact, getting free education as well as three meals a day, something not always available in their home villages, which were very poor. Given the great distances in the region, the possibility of students boarding at school opened up a level of education which would be unattainable in their local villages. And the choice of attending was up to them and to their parents.

As numerous interviews on China Global Television Network (CGTN) have shown, the graduates from these centers are now able to earn a living as artists, teachers, textile workers, or entrepreneurs.

Their mastery of Mandarin Chinese also allows them a wider choice of employment, including in the growing tourist industry in Xinjiang, which is booming in the aftermath of the added security the region now enjoys. More than 200 million tourists visited Xinjiang in 2019.

Xinjiang Unrest Helps to ‘Contain’ China

During the period of the Cold War, the West generally pursued a policy of “containing China” in an effort to “contain communism.” With the Sino-Soviet split, that policy changed somewhat, and the U.S. began to court China as an ally against Moscow. But the containment policy focused on what were considered Chi-



EIRNS/William Jones

Local musicians at the entrance to a subway station, and native Kazakh dancers in a popular restaurant, cater to the growing tourist trade in Urumqi. Photos from December 2018.



EIRNS/William Jones

na's "Achilles heels," namely Tibet, which had long been a region that the British used from their base in India to counter China, and the Uyghur majority province of Xinjiang. British Hong Kong served largely as another base, together with Taiwan, of anti-China operations. Now that China has become a rising power, these nodal points of destabilization are again being activated today by those in the West who want to keep China down.

But Xinjiang would never have experienced development without the thrust of China's rejuvenation. From the beginning of the People's Republic in 1949 and the creation of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) in 1954, the task at hand was to develop the region's agricultural production. While the Corps acted as a form of border police in a region that had been a bone of contention between China and the Soviet Union during the Second World War, it also had the task of developing the region, expanding agricultural production and building irrigation projects to better utilize the scarce water resources of the region. It chose those areas that were generally most arid, to avoid putting itself in competition with farmers already established in the region.

In 1962, as a result of the stresses of Mao's Great Leap Forward policies and the ongoing Sino-Soviet split, many of the ethnic groups in Xinjiang moved to the Soviet Union. The farms they left behind were then cultivated by the XPCC members. During the Cultural Revolution, the Corps was decimated and in 1975 completely disbanded. But when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor (1977-1981) began to encourage Muslim extremists in Afghanistan to build the mujahideen to wage jihad against the Soviets, there was a fear in China that the extremism would soon spread to Xinjiang. So in 1981 the Corps was reestablished. The XPCC has built ten medium-sized cities during its existence and participates in their administration. The XPCC comprises members of 37 ethnic groups.

It was also in Xinjiang that the seeds were planted for the Belt and Road Initiative. Xinjiang was the focus of China's Western development in the 1990s, which was premised on the construction of increased rail transportation lines to the Western regions. And with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, there were suddenly several new states bordering Xinjiang. The ability to increase trade with these new nations would

present a major boon to China's western development project.

Indeed, the first leg and prototype of what became the Belt and Road Initiative was the railroad that passed through Xinjiang to Europe through Kazakhstan, known as the Eurasian Land-Bridge. Some of the scholars involved in this project in the Xinjiang region, were the first to link up with the forces of Lyndon LaRouche in the early 1990s in the LaRouche-proposed expansion of the Productive Triangle development project in Europe to the countries in Central Asia and China, labeled the New Silk Road. The first conference on the topic was held in Beijing in 1996 and was a joint effort by the LaRouche movement and the Chinese government. The conference was sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology and featured Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the founder and President of the Schiller Institute, as a speaker.

Greening the Desert

In addition to crops—wheat, millet, and sorghum—Xinjiang has also been a major producer of cotton. Since 2000, the XPCC has concentrated on drip irrigation, a technique that the Chinese developed with the help of the Israelis, who had utilized this technology so successfully in the desert regions of their country. Drip irrigation can reduce water consumption by 60% and fertilizer use by 70%. It also helps control diseases and pests. The introduction of modern agricultural machinery to the region also helped to increase productivity. Liu Xunzhang, vice-president of the Xinjiang Yinfeng Modern Agricultural Equipment Company, said in 2014 that each of their harvesting machines could harvest 167 hectares of cotton during the month-long picking season. With improvements in efficiency, the number has risen to 300 hectares today.

In the first decade of this century, the Chinese government also launched a major forestation program near Kashgar in southern Xinjiang near the Pakistani border. Fifty-meter-wide belts of poplar trees were planted in the Makit region just west of the Taklamakan Desert. At the same time, saxaul trees were planted in neat rows to improve the condition of the soil and to act as wind-breaks during sandstorms and thereby mitigate soil erosion. Drip irrigation was applied at night and wire fences were placed around the young trees to protect them from animals. According to meteorological authorities, Makit saw 100 millimeters of rainfall in 2018 compared to only half that amount a decade ago. Sandstorms cur-

rently only occur about 50 days a year, compared to about 150 in 2009.

Forest coverage in oases has risen from 15 percent to 23.5 percent, and a total of 3.3 million mu—217,200 hectares (ha)—of farmland have been returned to forest, to hold back the desertification. Major projects for ecological protection have been launched, such as the Million Ecological Economic Forest Project in the Ili Valley and the Project for Prevention and Control of Desertification around the Tarim Basin, restoring a total of 24.6 million mu (1.64 million ha) of degraded lands and enclosing 51.6 million mu (3.4 million ha) of grassland to prevent excess grazing. The Tarim Basin project has curbed water and soil erosion over more than 4,000 square kilometers of small river valleys. Xinjiang has also benefited greatly from China's poverty alleviation campaign; 2.4 million Xinjiang residents have been enabled to rise out of poverty between 2014 and 2018.

In War, Truth Is the First Casualty

Statistics from Xinjiang tell a much different story than the fabrications of *The New York Times*. Per capita GDP in the province increased 100 times between 1978 and 2018. Xinjiang now boasts 21 civilian airports, more than any other Chinese province, and a road network now connects almost all villages across the region. In 1949, about 90 percent of Xinjiang's population were illiterate, and school enrollment for children was less than 20 percent. In 2018, the enrollment rate of school-age children at the primary school stage reached 99.9 percent. The number of people living in poverty has dropped from 19.4 percent of the population in 2014, to 6.1 percent in 2018. Average life expectancy has risen from 30 years in 1949, to 72 years at present.

The development of the Belt and Road will also provide further upgrades in the form of transportation and other infrastructure in the region. The city of Urumqi has already been transformed from a sleepy border town into a major center of high-tech production and high-end boutiques. As a major transit hub between Europe and China, it is fast becoming a booming metropolis with an international flair. All the major boutiques and department stores are setting up operations there and the dire poverty that so long plagued the region is gradually being eliminated.



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Urumqi, a major hub on the original Silk Road, is today a modern cultural, political, and commercial center on the Belt and Road, a gateway to China's western neighbors and Europe beyond. Photo from 2018.

A highway connecting Kashgar city to Pakistan as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is expected to be soon completed, bringing the wealth of the New Silk Road into southern Xinjiang. This will also enhance the movement of Chinese trade and investment into all of South and Southwest Asia, enabling countries like Syria and Iraq to begin their much-needed reconstruction after the long years of war.

That would be a grand achievement for China's BRI project. But there are clearly forces in the West, particularly among the old British colonial crowd and their neoconservative U.S. disciples, still licking their wounds over the "loss" of Hong Kong. These are forces accustomed to playing with Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong in their "great game," in order to stop a "rising China" that threatens to seriously disrupt their international (imperial) "world order." This is the root of that intensive anti-China propaganda spewing out of the mouthpieces of London and Washington.

But for the people of Xinjiang, including the large Uyghur population in the province, the bright future delineated by China's modernization provides an avenue of hope for them as well. The high-speed locomotive that is China's economic development will also carry them to new heights of prosperity and success, heights greater than ever imagined in the hellish world of radical Islam.