

Xinjiang

A friend of mine, Madlen Kobi, is doing research work for her dissertation in Xinjiang. In April 2013 she presented a very interesting overall review of Xinjiang in a public talk. One of her focus points was the various forms of cohabitation of the two main ethnic groups, the Uyghurs and the Han-Chinese living in Xinjiang. All the pictures in this article are hers unless otherwise indicated.



(Source: http://china.otspecial.org/albums/maps/map_xinjiang.jpg 7.5.2013)

Xinjiang serves as a geopolitical buffer zone between East-China and Central Asia.

Since 1949 the People's Republic of China has five autonomous regions. One of them is Xinjiang. The legal status of such regions guarantees a restricted self-government on various administrative levels for officially recognized ethnic minorities. They have the basic right of speaking their own language and practicing their own cultural traditions and their religion.

Xinjiang covers nearly 1/6 of the area of the whole country. The relatively densely populated oases cover only about 4 % of the area. Scarcely populated waste land and deserts cover about 45 % and the rest consists of equally scarcely populated mountain areas.

Xinjiang's population is about 25 million people consisting of Uyghurs (45%) and equally many Han Chinese. However, not all Han are registered as inhabitants of Xinjiang, because some of them have left their 户口 hùkǒu (residence permit) in their native town or village in another part of China. Thus the figure 45% is probably not quite correct. About 10% of the population consists of Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Russians und Hui.

Economy

Xinjiang is economically and geopolitically very important for China. The area has many natural resources such as oil, gas, coal, all kinds of minerals as well as water.

Did you know that the desert ground is very nutritious? With proper irrigation it can be used to grow various produce. Fruit from Xinjiang are exported into all parts of China. The sweetest grapes and the most delicious mangos I've ever eaten had been grown there. Cotton is an important raw material and 1/5 of the tomatoes for the worldwide production of ketchup comes from Xinjiang.

Culture

The Uyghurs speak the Turkic language called Uyghur, which has similarities with Turkish, Uzbek and Kirghiz. Their religion is a moderate Sunni-Islam. Most Uyghurs are Muslims and they also practice their religion. However, religion plays no important role for the Communist Party or the Han-Chinese. This is because the government propagates the Marxist-Leninist ideology based on a secular worldview. Women in the countryside as well as those belonging to the lower classes in towns often wear a scarf to cover their heads. This is seldom the case with women of the middle- and higher classes.

Representatives of various minorities in Beijing.



(Quelle: <http://www.greatwalldiscovery.com/china-guide/special-topics-in-china/chinese-minority> 7.5.2013)

Many aspects of ethnic cultures like dresses, dances and music have become excessively folkloric and are often instrumentalized for touristic purposes.

Ethnic segregation

The practice of ethnic segregation is nourished by prejudice. Many Han seem to think that the Uyghurs are uneducated and lazy. Uyghurs, on the other hand, are often of the opinion that the Han only want to take their land and are mainly interested in doing business. Inter-ethnic marriages are very rare these days.

In the 1980's and 1990's there were quite a number of bilingual schools. Today most of the teaching is done in Mandarin Chinese. Only subjects such as Uyghur History and Culture are still taught in Uyghur. Fact is that people with Chinese skills find it easier to get good jobs.



Uyghur housing and city dwellings of the Han.

Differences between ethnic groups manifest themselves in the daily life. People belonging to different ethnic groups do not live “together”, but rather side by side. Time and again there are local revolts organized by Uyghurs, who feel repressed and discriminated by the Han. Such events prove that the harmonious cohabitation propagated by the government does not mirror the reality. It seems that the ethnic segregation has become even more visible since the revolts of 2009.

Cohabitation

The government propagates harmonious cohabitation with posters like the one below. Such posters can be seen at every street corner in cities in Xinjiang



民族团结是福. 分裂动乱是祸. *Minzu tuanjie shi fu. Fenlie dongluan shi huo.* – Ethnic unity means happiness; ethnic segregation and unrest are a disaster.

A kind of “national founding myth” tells the story of Kurban Tulum, an electrician born in Xinjiang in 1883. After the Revolution of 1949 he travelled to Beijing to thank Mao Zedong for the liberation of Xinjiang and to give him grapes as a sign of his appreciation. Uncle Tulum was of the opinion that a new, hopeful era began in Xinjiang after the expulsion of the local war lords. Tulum traveled the first 1500 km of his journey to the capital Ürümqi on donkey-back. From there on he travelled by airplane to Beijing. The story doesn’t tell what state the grapes were in when they finally arrived in Beijing.



This big statue in Hotan symbolizes the encounter of the Uyghurs and the State. It symbolizes the gratitude that the Uyghurs should feel for being part of China today. As a matter of fact, living conditions in general are better and more people have work in Xinjiang than in the neighboring countries.

Cohabitation of ethnic groups takes mainly place in urban areas, which keep growing rapidly due to migrants from other parts of China and from the countryside of Xinjiang. Of course there have always been contacts between different peoples in the oases of Xingjiang, which were important trading places on the Silk Road. However, since the 1950's new cities are being built mainly by the Han.

In state institutions the Han and the Uyghurs work together. Many of these institutions have quotas for each ethnic group. Therefore the Han and the Uyghurs mingle in the working environment. Furthermore, the fact that the employers must provide housing for their employees there is a more or less voluntary "ethnic mélange" in residential areas.

Another place for people to mingle is school. As mentioned before most children go to Chinese schools and are thus automatically constantly confronted with the Han.

Young urban people are beginning to mingle also in their free time. Modern restaurants and fast food establishments as well as Shopping Malls provide public spaces where friends and colleagues with different ethnic backgrounds can come together.



A Shopping Mall in Xinjiang