THE TURKICS OF XINJIANG:
NATIONALISM AND CHINESE SUBJUGATION (1756-1997)

ROY ANTHONY ROGERS
AGG 99012

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DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL AND STRATEGIC STUDIES
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To my loving parents and
in the fond memory of my late friend, Mr. Chong Lan Seng (DSP)
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Roy Anthony Rogers
Department of International and Strategic Studies
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Malaya
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ROC</td>
<td>Republic of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLPD</td>
<td>Sinkiang League for Peace and Democracy</td>
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<td>SXMD</td>
<td>Southern Xinjiang Military District</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAR</td>
<td>Tibet Autonomous Region</td>
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<td>TIRET</td>
<td>Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan</td>
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<td>TKM</td>
<td>Turkestan Liberation Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>UHTDZ</td>
<td>Urumqi High Technology Development Zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMR</td>
<td>Urumqi Military Region</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>Soviet Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>WUXAR</td>
<td>Women’s Union of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>XIA</td>
<td>Xinjiang Islamic Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XPCC</td>
<td>Xinjiang Production-Construction Corps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XPRC</td>
<td>Xinjiang Provincial Revolutionary Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XUAR</td>
<td>Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region</td>
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Map 1: People’s Republic of China (PRC)

Source: http://www.maps-of-china.com/china-country.shtml
Map 2: Province of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR)

INTRODUCTION

This work is an attempt to survey the relations between the Turkics of Xinjiang and the Chinese governments over a period of 241 years. The main feature of these relations was the Turkic struggle for independence and perseverance of their culture and identity. It also focuses on the policies employed by the Chinese to colonise, subjugate, sinofy and integrate the Turkics of Xinjiang. Hence, this work aims to study the historical evolution of the Turkics’ struggle for independence and perseverance of their culture and identity against Chinese attempts at subjugation.

Xinjiang or formerly known as East Turkestan is located at the northwest of China and is China’s largest province as well as the only province that has the most international boundaries which it shares with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. Ethnically, Xinjiang can be divided into two major groups namely the Turkics and non-Turkics. The Turkics speak the Turkic language and can be further divided into five major sub-ethnic groups namely the Uighur, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Uzbek and Tajik, of which the Uighurs are the majority. The majority of the Turkics are Muslims belonging to the Sufi sect. The non-Turkics, on the other hand, are the Chinese (Hans), Manchus and Russians.

The Turkics have had a long tradition of their own empires with an equally long and rich history. The Turkic empires were involved in trading activities of the Silk Road and embraced Islam in the 10ᵗʰ century as a result of the missionary activities of Arab
traders. Subsequently, the Turkic empires were absorbed into the Mongol Empire that was established by Genghis Khan. During the five centuries of Mongol rule (1209-1756), the Turks influenced the Mongols both culturally and linguistically such that the era is commonly known as ‘Turkicization’ of the Mongols. It was not surprising that the Turks did not consider the Mongols as colonisers when compared to the Chinese and hence tolerated Mongol rule. It was also during the Mongol rule that Islam started to spread rapidly in this province.

The Chinese -- the largest non-Turks in Xinjiang -- invaded this province in 1756 during the Ching Dynasty (1644-1911) and expelled the Mongols. Subsequently, Xinjiang was incorporated as a Chinese territory and in 1884 declared as a Chinese province. Chinese invasion created fierce resistance from the Turks such that four major rebellions were organised to liberate Xinjiang from Chinese rule. The most significant uprising was the rebellion led by Yakub Beg that lasted for 13 years (1864-1877). The Turks wanted to free Xinjiang from Chinese rule and establish an Islamic khanate. Although the Yakub Beg rebellion was crushed by the Chinese they were however, unable to eliminate the Turkic struggle for independence. In 1911, the Ching Dynasty was overthrown by the Koumintang (KMT), which in turn established the Republic of China (ROC). However, the central Chinese government had little control over the administration of the province because from 1911 till 1944 local Chinese warlords administered Xinjiang. It was only in 1944 that the Koumintang (KMT) was able to expand its power into the province. In the 20th century, the Turks were motivated by ethno-nationalism to establish a Turkic republic when in 1933 the Turkic
nationalists attempted to separate Xinjiang from China through the establishment of the Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkistan (TIRET). However, this proved futile when the Chinese managed to suppress the movement with assistance of the Soviet Union (USSR). At that time, the USSR wanted to expand its influence into Central Asia and as a result became very influential economically and politically in Xinjiang during the 1930s and 1940s. Additionally, the KMT also introduced oppressive laws to subdue the Turkics but failed to curb Turkic nationalism and instead provoked the Turkics to rebel. In 1944, the Turkic nationalists once again attempted to separate Xinjiang from China by establishing the East Turkestan Republic (ETR). Meanwhile, the KMT was engaged in a bitter struggle against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for the control of central China. Besides that the KMT was also fighting against the Japanese invasion of China. As such, the KMT was unable to defeat the Turkic separatists and therefore as compromise a coalition government between the KMT and ETR was formed in 1945. However, the coalition government was unable to win over the majority of the Turkics because the Turkics continued to demand for autonomy from the KMT. After the end of Second World War in 1945, a civil war between the KMT and CCP erupted once again such that the KMT eventually lost its control over China to the CCP. On 1 October 1949, the CCP assumed control over of most mainland China and declared the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). As a result, the KMT forces in central China under the leadership of General Chiang Kai Shek withdrew to Taiwan. Under these circumstances, the ETR transferred its allegiance to the PRC and the CCP was able to take control of Xinjiang without any major obstacle.
Under CCP rule, Xinjiang was declared as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) on 1 October 1955. Despite this declaration of autonomy, major decisions were still made by the CCP Xinjiang Branch led by Hans and not Turkics. With the objective of eliminating Turkic nationalism, the PRC embarked on a policy of sinification through language, migration of Hans into Xinjiang, religious persecution and militarization. Despite more than three decades of oppression, Turkic nationalism however prevailed and in fact grew stronger after the disintegration of the USSR in the 1990s. The Turkics of Xinjiang were motivated by their fellow Turkics living in other parts of Central Asia who had managed to achieve independence such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, Islamic fundamentalism from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia has had a deep impact on the Turkics to wage *jihad* against the Hans.

As such, since 1990 a series of bombings and murders began to unfold in Xinjiang. These were basically manifestations of Turkic anger and hatred towards Chinese rule. Furthermore, it also indicated the rise of militancy among the Turkics. The testimony of this was when in 1997, Turkic militants organised a series of bombings in Beijing. It was a watershed in the history of Turkic struggle for independence because these acts of terror were no more confined to Xinjiang but had in fact spread to China proper.

Despite a long and rich history, there is however a serious dearth of scholarly works on the Turkics of Xinjiang. There are not many works concerning Turkic nationalism when compared to research on the Tibetan nationalism. Although both the Turkics and the Tibetans harbour similar hopes in achieving independence eventually, however, many
are unaware that in reality, the Turkics living in Xinjiang encountered more inhuman treatment from the Chinese authorities compared to the Tibetans. Moreover, the Chinese occupied Xinjiang for a much longer period as they were already in power 201 years earlier than their occupation of Tibet. The Chinese annexed Xinjiang in 1756 whereas Tibet was only annexed in 1955. The study of the Turkics living under the Chinese authorities and their struggle for survival has not received the attention it truly deserves. Hence, this study of Turkic nationalism provides a fresh look towards research relating to the minorities in China.

The study demonstrates the nature of the nationalist aspirations of the Turkics that has not waned in spite of Chinese policies of sinofication and subjugation over the past 241 years. Unlike previous research that only concentrated on major revolts or specific periods of Chinese administration in Xinjiang, this study focuses on the evolution of the Turkic nationalism since 1756. Linda Benson's *The Ili Rebellion: The Moslem Challenge to Chinese Authority in Xinjiang, 1944-1945* only highlights the events that took place in Xinjiang during the 1940s and does not demonstrate the evolutionary nature of Turkic nationalism nor its substance.  

1 Similarly, Allen S. Whitting’s *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?*, 1980), Andrew D. W Forbes’ *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia A Political History of Republic Sinkiang 1911-1949* and Aittchen Wu’s *Turkestan Tumult* mainly focuses solely on the revolts and separatist movements during the 1930s and 1940s. However, a thorough analysis on the trend and features of the Turkic nationalism that can

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be traced back to the nineteenth century was absent. Apart from that little elaboration on Chinese policies of subjugation and its impact towards the Turkics is provided. In fact, many earlier works on Turkic nationalism ignored the issue of human rights violations by the Chinese. Because the Turkics of Xinjiang have had a long history of suffering, discrimination and violation under Chinese administration especially during the Cultural Revolution and even today, it is in fact timely to divert the attention of the world to their plight. In reality, the Turkic had been economically and politically marginalized in their own homeland.

This study also surveys the links between the nationalist movements with terrorist organisations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. At present, the terrorist activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan have come under fire especially since the September 11 incident. With this, the world's attention has shifted to the phenomenon and nature of modern terrorism that seem to have a particular strong hold in the two countries mentioned above. Ahmed Rashid's *The Resurgence of Central Asian* highlights the linkage between Turkic nationalists and the terrorist organisations in these two countries but details on the nature of assistance provided by the terrorist organisations in Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Turkics are not elaborated. This study, on the other hand, will highlight the assistance given by the terrorist organisations from Pakistan and Afghanistan to the Turkic nationalists. These include weapons, political and religious indoctrination and guerrilla warfare training. Moreover this study will also demonstrate

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the involvement of third parties in supporting the Turkic nationalistic struggle for independence, such as the involvement of Uighur organisations stationed in Turkey, Iran and the Wahabis.

In addition, this study will provide a fresh and latest insight into Xinjiang and the Central Asian region when compared to Owen Lattimore’s *Pivot of Asia* -- one of the earliest books on Xinjiang.\(^6\) Though an extremely important piece for any beginner, the latter work is now considered fairly outdated. Apart from Lattimore’s work, there are also works by Western explorers written namely in the early 20th century such as Jan Myrdal’s *The Silk Road: A Journey from the High Pamirs and Ili through Sinkiang and Kansu*. Though rich in first-hand information about Xinjiang, it however provides little analysis on the region or the people but is mainly on personal experiences and encounters of the explorer during his journey.

The study attempts to contribute towards a better understanding of the Central Asia region in general and as such differs from Dilip Hiro’s *Between Marx and Muhammad The Changing Face of Central Asia* because the latter only highlights the ideological conflict between communism and Islam among the former Soviet Republics.\(^7\) However, the situation in Xinjiang is unique because the struggle is not an ideological one, but rather an ethno-religious struggle between the Turkics and the Chinese. Apart from that, Dilip Hiro chooses to focus on nationalism in the Central Asian republics but is silent on

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Turkic nationalism in Xinjiang and its impact. Little mention is also made on the impact of the resurgence of the Central Asian republics on Xinjiang.

This work takes a chronological approach to study the historical evolution of Turkic-Chinese relations for the past 241 years, each chapter focussing on the different stages and characteristics of Turkic nationalism vis-à-vis Chinese policies of subjugation. Research for the was conducted mainly in the libraries of the University of Malaya, the National University of Malaysia as well as interactions with the Muslim Xinjiang students studying in Malaysia. The internet provided useful resources and information for analysis, obtained from various websites that featured the conflict in Xinjiang as well as the predicament of the Uighurs living in exile and official reports from the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The work is mainly divided into five chapters. Chapter One provides a background on the Turkics and the province of Xinjiang. It traces the historical links and settlements in East Turkestan prior to Chinese occupation in 1756. Chapter Two discusses early resistance by the Turkics’ towards the Chinese occupation, divided into two major periods. The first is the khojas’ rebellion against Chinese feudals during the Ching Dynasty and the second is Turkic Muslims separatist movements during the KMT administration. Chapter Three highlights Turkic-Chinese relations after the annexation of Xinjiang by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 1949. It details the position of the Chinese Communist Party in Xinjiang and its policies, the establishment of the XUAR and lastly, the consolidation of Chinese administration and the policy of sinicification.
Chapter Four discusses the re-emergence of Turkic nationalism after the disintegration of the USSR in 1990 and the formation of independent Central Asian republics. In addition this chapter also traces the growth of political violence in Xinjiang as a result of decades of Chinese suppression. Chapter Five explores the impact of socio-economic policies of the Peoples Republic of China towards Xinjiang and also traces the socio-economic changes experienced by the Turkics under PRC. The implications of the findings of this study are presented in the conclusion.

It is noteworthy to mention here that by tracing more than two centuries of Turkic nationalism and Chinese subjugation, this work attempts to highlight the nature, substance and character of Turkic nationalism and how over a period of time this has been innovated to suit changing conditions. What had started as an ethno-nationalist movement is slowly but surely moving to take on a religious fervour in Xinjiang. More importantly, this work also attempts to highlight the plight of the Xinjiang Muslims that has been ignored by the world community for such a long time. Unlike Tibet that has received ample international attention and reaction mainly due the effort of the Dalai Lama, the Xinjiang issue has been fairly ignored by the world.