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UDC 339.9(510)+338.2 (510)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.36059/978-966-397-414-9-28>

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OBSERVING THE UYGHUR IDENTITY THROUGH KASHGAR

Key words: Uyghurs, Xinjiang, Kashgar, China state, Sinicization.

Kashgar is perhaps the best place to observe the daily life of the Uyghur people and their interaction with the Chinese state today. It is one of the westernmost cities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), predominantly populated by Muslim Uyghurs. This area, an oasis of the ancient Silk Road, retains its historical charm despite rapid urbanization and modernization.

Landing at the new Kashgar airport, the city's transformation was evident, yet road signs in both Chinese and Uyghur, along with the distinct physical appearances and clothing of the people, confirmed Xinjiang's unique identity.

High-tech surveillance and the visible presence of police and military officials significantly impact residents and travelers, reflecting the government's concern over potential separatist activities. Last year, Thomas Heberer and Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer's article in the Swiss newspaper *Neue*

Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ) on the “normalization” in Xinjiang sparked debate. My interlocutors among Uyghurs mentioned a shift towards a “slight status quo” under the new Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Ma Xingrui, appointed in late 2021. He replaced Chen Quanguo, notorious for his harsh policies targeting ethnic minorities. Ma Xingrui publicly stated that the “Sinicization of Islam is inevitable” and aims to balance security and development in Xinjiang. Despite these changes, the repressive atmosphere remains, and the Sinicization and securitization policies are apparent.

The older generation of Uyghurs visibly suffers under these policies. The transformation of their living spaces in a “civilizing” way [4, p. 299, 352], evokes very depressing sentiments among them. They express a sense of lost identity and cultural disrespect, exacerbated by mandatory Mandarin language use and increasing Han migration.

Language is crucial to Uyghur identity, historically used to demarcate community boundaries, “a mean to demarcate the boundaries of community and exclude those whose mother tongue is not Uyghur.” [3, p. 64]. Bilingual education, launched in 2002, prioritized Mandarin [5, p. 257], and today, most Uyghurs under 40 speak Mandarin well. However, bilingual education seems to have ceased in Kashgar, with the Uyghur language now taught mainly within families. Patriotic education dominates the curriculum, and Uyghur children often inquire about one’s affection for China.

Islam distinguishes the Uyghurs from the Han Chinese, reinforcing nationalistic sentiments historically. However, strict surveillance has diminished Islam’s influence. The Niujie Mosque in Beijing was nearly empty during my visit, highlighting this trend. The Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar, freshly renovated and adorned with Chinese flags, now functions more as a tourist attraction than a religious site, selling tickets to visitors. Surveillance and government-appointed imams erode trust, and busy work schedules further reduce regular prayer. Despite this, Islam remains integral to Uyghur life.

Social and business interactions between Uyghurs and Han Chinese show notable distancing, with inequalities persisting in recruitment and social gatherings. Uyghur youth, to succeed, must comply with state policies, integrating into Han-dominated society. A conversation with a Uyghur who moved from Kashgar to Ürümqi revealed the existence of Uyghur elite groups who, to thrive, must assimilate and remain loyal to the Communist Party. This elite prioritizes economic development over cultural identity, voluntarily Sinicizing more in the industrial north than in the agricultural south.

The government’s promotion of a Xinjiang identity and Xinjiang human rights and legal protection seems more an effort to suppress distinct ethnic identities rather than preserve them. Kashgar’s Old City remains a living

museum, with traditional Uyghur homes, mosques, and shops. The older generation of men and some women wear the “doppa”, a traditional skullcap, or any other type of hat, and many women wear a headscarf made of “etles”. Some young women wear simple jeans and T-shirts, and some still wear dresses in bright or vivid colors, as they did a decade ago [2, p. 20–21]. These elements provide a sense of their ethnic affiliation and contrast them with Han Chinese.

In conclusion, the Uyghurs in Kashgar today live in parallel realities: they are pleased to receive the socio-economic benefits from the state system, but refuse to be incorporated into the Chinese nation. The reason is clear: China does not treat the Uyghurs as equals, and they feel like “strangers in their own land” [1].

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