

Access to Education in Xinjiang, China

Dr. Mettursun Beydulla (Fatih University)

Alkent 2000 Mh., 34500 İstanbul, Turkey
bmettursun@gmail.com

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Abstract. Most of the world's Uyghurs are indigenous to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), China. XUAR is home to 13 ethnic nationalities who make up 61% of the population, with Uyghurs making up 46.42 % (10,019,758). The Uyghur language is a depository of Uyghur culture and history and Islam is an element of identity that is intimately bound up with the Uyghur language. These two important concepts allow us to trace the broad dynamics of change in education as it relates to language, religion and identity through the late Qing period (1885-1911), the republican (1911-1949), and the Communist era (1949-present) in Xinjiang.

This paper focuses on access to education in Xinjiang with information on language policies, religious education and opportunities for Uyghurs. There is also reference to Turkey's new outlook on the 'Kurdish' problem and links to bi-lingual education in the US as examples of what is done in other places. Both of these situations have relevance to the issues faced by Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

1. Introduction

For Uyghurs, perceptions of educational development indispensably revolve around three key factors: religion, language and identity. Uyghurs, Turkic-speaking Sunni Muslims from the Hanifi school of Islam, are indigenous to the XUAR. Xinjiang, whose location makes it a crucial part of the "Silk Road," is the historic channel by which Eastern Asia connects to Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Therefore, it occupies a position of vital international strategic importance. Xinjiang, situated in the far northwest of China, is China's largest region, making up one-sixth of its total land mass. It borders eight countries, namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, the Republic of Mongolia, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Within China, it shares borders with three autonomous province/regions: Gansu, Qinghai, and Tibet. In population, Uyghurs make up 45%, Han Chinese 40%, and the rest are other minorities: Kazakhs, Hui, Mongolian, Kirgiz, Tajik, Xibe, Manchu, Uzbek, Russian, Duar, Tartars and others [1].

Xinjiang is a multilingual and multicultural society. The Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kirgiz, Uzbeks and Tatars speak Turkic languages; Mongolian, Xibe, Russian and Tajik are also spoken extensively. The Han, Hui and Manchu nationalities speak Chinese, but Uyghur is the major regional language used and it serves as the lingua franca.

Even though Putonghua (Mandarin) is the national language, overall, less than 1% of Uyghurs are fluent in it [2]. Recent statistics report that 82% of Uyghurs over 15 are unable to read Chinese and 10.8% can "read Chinese with difficulty" [3]. Dru Gladney reports that from 1982 to 1990, the percentage of the Uyghur population who attended primary school increased from 37 to 43% and attendance at undergraduate college increased from 0.1 to 2.1%. During the same eight-year span, illiteracy within the Uyghur population also decreased from 45 to 26.6% [4]. Furthermore, by 2001 97% of all "school-aged" children in Xinjiang were enrolled in school, and 61.8% of total in-school students were minorities [5]. Despite a general increase in student enrollment however, education

levels of Uyghurs still lag far behind Han Chinese. Only 6.9% of the Uyghur population 15 and older (compared to 9.6% of Han living in western China), have graduated from high school. Moreover, the percentage of Uyghurs over the age of 15 who have received a university education has only increased from 2.1% in 1990 to 3.1% in 2006 [6].

2. Historical Overview of Education in Xinjiang

Before 1878, the main form of education among Uyghurs in Xinjiang was that offered through religious schools attached to local mosques, in the religious teacher's home and madrasas. Islamic schooling has deep roots in local communities in Xinjiang and followed a model similar to the rest of the Islamic world [7]. Illiteracy rates were very high among both sexes in nineteenth century Xinjiang, but illiteracy was particularly widespread among women [8].

2.1 The Qing Period

After the Manchu-Qing reconquest of the region in 1878, the Qing shifted to an approach towards Xinjiang that was more assimilative. Persons with top political and military authority were for the first time predominantly Han, not Manchu, Mongol or Uyghurs. Education was a key component of the reconquest and administration of Xinjiang under Zuo Zongtang from 1878 and his successors through the end of the Qing. Before the reannexation of Xinjiang in 1884, the most notable Chinese style schools were the Qing free private schools (*yishu*), which for the most part ignored the Uyghur population.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the Uyghurs were affected by global currents of reform as reflected in the establishment of schools that followed the *usul-i jadid* (new method) approach to education. These provided an important channel for the broadening of access to religious knowledge beyond religious institutions. Modern Islamic education had already appeared in Xinjiang during the 1880s and 1890s, inspired by the jadidist movement in the Crimea and Central Asia and developed in Turkey. In this type of school, the "primarily religious content of the curriculum reinforced the correlation between the written word and the supernatural." [9]. The curriculum sometimes included poetry, including Nawai in Turkic and Hafiz in Persian. This emphasis on memorization of religious texts and teaching the basic tenets of Islam links the education in Xinjiang with traditional education of the Islamic world.

2.2 The Republican Period

In 1912 Abduqadir Damolla set up a Jadid school which sent students to Istanbul, Qazan and Ufa. He was one who combined religious piety while striving for modern learning and development. In 1908 the Tatar merchants in Ghulja opened a school teaching in Turkish to girls [10]. One of the first progressive primary schools in southern Xinjiang was established in village of Ekisaq in Ustun Artush, not far from Kashgar. The Xinhai Revolution (1911-12) in Xinjiang began founding schools with modern curricula. These several hundred *xuetang*, many of which were converted from *yixue*, primarily served the Chinese population of cities and villages throughout Xinjiang [11]. In 1914 or 1915 the first teaching college was founded in Kashgar with Habibogli Ahmat Kamal as director. Kamal had studied in Istanbul and he based his curriculum on the Ottoman model. The 1910s and 1920s saw the growth of these reformist schools in Xinjiang.

The 1930s saw the expansion of 'scientific' (*penni*) schools in Kashgar, together with various efforts to reform madrasa education. Reformist Muslims at that time faced challenges I conservative clergy opposed to the teaching of secular subjects and an extremely adverse political environment. The Jadids encountered significant opposition from the established Islamic elite. At the beginning of Yang Zengxin's tenure as warlord in Xinjiang, Urumchi did not have even one Islamic new-method school in large part because Yang's policies were inimical to these schools [12]. Yang Zengxin, the Republican Governor of Xinjiang from 1912 to 1928, and his successor Jin

Shuren, 1928 to 1934, sought to isolate the region from external influences, and imposed censorship. The rise to power of Sheng Shi-ts'ai as governor of Xinjiang in 1934 initially led to a more liberal period, allowing for the flourishing of reformist newspapers, journals and schools. During the period of the 1930's and 1940's, education expanded on many fronts, with influences from local Uyghur scholars and sources as well as Soviet influences. As an indication of this Soviet influence, in 1941 a school opened especially for Tatar students as well as a Russian-language school in the Ili River valley. Sheng's political control from 1937 onwards ushered in a period of brutal repression. Muslim reformist intellectuals faced particular persecution during Sheng's ten years of absolute power in Xinjiang, in which an estimated 100,000 people were arrested. Between 1944-1949, during the East Turkistan Republican period, Xinjiang had 544 elementary and middle schools, 1830 classrooms, 56,900 students, and 2059 teachers and staff. As well as regular schools, there were science middle schools, agricultural, animal care and medical schools totaling 500 students. As well, a tailoring schools for girls was established [13]"

2.3 The Communist Era

The imposition of communist rule in 1949 and the consequent secular appropriation of the modern education system and print media together with political restrictions on travel to other Muslim societies suppressed reformist developments in Xinjiang. The education system has reflected this secularism and control with a system of separate schooling based on mother tongue instruction. Although the state recognized minorities' language rights and established infrastructures for minority education, the results have been mixed. The Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress passed a provisional constitution for the Common Programs, which (in Article 53) guarantees minorities the right to use and develop their native languages and scripts, and requires the government to assist them to do so. In 1954, the rights of minorities to use and develop their native languages and the obligation of their local governments to use their languages were further affirmed at the First Chinese People's Congress and stated in the first constitution of the PRC (Principles, Article 71, and Article 77). Education in Uyghur developed rapidly during the first pluralistic stage from 1949 to 1957, with substantial reductions in illiteracy and substantial increases in the number of people completing primary and secondary education as well as enrolling in universities.

At the same time, primary schooling became compulsory although the higher levels of schools opened up more slowly. From the late 1950s to the early 1960s, Chinese-medium classes increased significantly and Uyghur language classes decreased significantly. In Uyghur communities, the Xinjiang government proposed to expand Chinese-medium courses from secondary schools to primary schools, particularly to those in urban communities [14].

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Xinjiang's educational system was virtually shut down and Uyghur culture as a separate entity publicly ceased. In July 1966 all Uyghur literary journals ceased publication and any pages that had been given over to Uyghur literature in newspapers were cancelled. For the next seven years Uyghur literature had no public exposure. It was only in 1973 that the literary journal *Xinjiang Adebeyat Seneti* (Xinjiang Literature and Art) was published again [15]. In 1980 the government launched a major educational reform which mandated nine years of compulsory education, six years of primary and three years of junior secondary. As well, adult education in mother tongue also began to draw down the region's high rate of illiteracy. China's response to both a new international environment and the post 1989 outbreaks of unrest in Xinjiang from 1990 onwards was a decided shift in domestic policy. As well, attitudes towards non-Han ethnic groups, particularly Uyghurs, involved reforms or reinterpretations of official policies towards religion, education, and cultural expression. After a violent uprising in the town of Baren in Kashgar in 1990, the Ghulja incident in 1997 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government gradually changed its previous policy of tolerance.

In Tibet, the call for Chinese cities to establish schools and classes for Tibetans began in 1981. The

Tibet *neidi* schools policy was viewed as so successful that in 1999, it was extended to cover students from XUAR [16].

3. Bilingual Education and other language policies

‘Bilingual education’ in Xinjiang University (1996-2002), at first meant that the minority language of a given area was to be used as a transitional language and a language of instruction in the humanities before students began instruction in Mandarin [17]. In September 2002, Xinjiang universities began using only textbooks and instruction in Mandarin, the only exception being Chaghatay (Turkic language classes). The government used Xinjiang University as the experiment for new bilingual education policy and slowly expanded to other colleges, first in Urumchi and then across the region. In 2004 the government made the decision to phase out the old system of Uyghur language primary through university education, substituting Chinese as the primary teaching medium. Slowly the policy has been implemented in high school, then middle school and then elementary school and slowly expanded to the rest of the regions in Xinjiang. By September 2005, most of the 15 middle schools in Keriya were bilingual classes. Since 2005 every year has seen the establishment of one more ‘bilingual’ class in each middle school in Keriya and this number has continued to grow. Now, all schools (include most kindergartens) use Chinese as the medium of instruction. This policy has gone so far that some Uyghur elementary schools offer a Uyghur language course in fourth grade.

Xinjiang classes (*neidi gaozhong ban*) is a program that funds middle school-aged students from Xinjiang, mostly ethnic Uyghurs, to attend school in predominately Han populated cities located throughout eastern China. By 2006, they had been expanded from 12 to 26 in inland China cities and had an enrollment of thousands of students [18]. According to the Xinjiang Evening News of August 25, 2007, the government had sent another 5000 local top students to Xinjiang Classes, which removed top minority students in Xinjiang from their cultural environment and enrolled them in classes with Chinese language instruction in high schools.

The government began experimentally setting up a few minority-Han joint schools in 1960. Although Xinjiang separated minority and Han schools after the Cultural Revolution, the number of such joint schools nevertheless increased to 165 by 1981. That number then decreased to 44 in 1984. Minority-Han joint schools were again encouraged in the late 1990s. In 2000, there were 461 minority-Han joint schools in total; in 2004, the number was 656; in 2005, it increased to 707. Due to the lack of statistical figures of students in minority-Han joint schools and Han schools, their respective proportion is incalculable. An example is Kashgar No. 6 Middle School. It was a minority-Han joint school during the period 1971–1981 but was then divided into a minority school (No.6 Middle School) and a Han school (No. 12 Middle School) with a wall built in the middle of the campus. The two schools were recombined in 2005 [19]. In January 2011, the Ghulja Second Middle School was forcefully added to the Sixth Chinese Middle School. Around 2004 the Keriya Chinese Middle school was added to the Uyghur high school. These are examples of the kinds of forced changes that happen across Xinjiang.

Many Chinese teachers, mostly from inland China, have come to Xinjiang under the name of *rencai* (talented or qualified person). They receive high salaries, subsidies and even retirement benefits. Their numbers have increased at all levels of Uyghur schools across Xinjiang. Secondary schools that are experimental and have “bilingual” classes use Chinese as the medium of instruction. However, some secondary schools in Xinjiang, especially southern Xinjiang, use Uyghur for some school subjects (science, math, history, etc.) up through senior middle school, but hours of Chinese classes increase year by year.

Much like in China, bilingual education in the United States has been established, resisted, and reformulated within modifying historical, political, social, and economic contexts. The Bilingual Education Act in the US was reauthorized in 2001, improving and expanding upon the opportunities

for school districts and institutions of higher education to receive assistance from this optional, competitive grant program. Significant changes in the program is the replacing all references to bilingual education with the phrase "language instruction educational program" and turning it into a state-administered formula-grant program. Bilingual education offers great opportunities to both language-majority and language-minority populations in the US. It is an educational approach that not only allows students to master academic content material, but also become proficient in two languages [20]. What is most significant in the US is that bilingual education is seen as benefitting both the language majority and language minority students.

On another note, China has done a great deal to produce school textbooks in ethnic minority languages, including Uyghur. However, the Tibetan language school textbooks in mathematics, science and other subjects are often direct translations of Chinese language materials. Moreover, the updating of Uyghur language textbooks is slow and costly. Sometimes Uyghur teachers translate text books to Uyghur from Chinese to help to students' in their college entrance exams.

However, language is not only a means of communication, but also an expression of one's cultural and ethnic identity, and thus plays a critical role in judgments as to whether one is an "insider" or "outsider". It is clear that Mandarin, despite a long period of dominance, still has a generally low status among Uyghurs, who generally refer to it as "*henzuchegep*", (hanzuhua), or "Han speech" or, even more derogatorily, *hitayche/khitayche*. Despite years of Chinese language education, the level of Mandarin spoken by Uyghur academics can be very low and even traders in Han-dominated Urumchi may speak very poor Chinese.

Regarding mother tongue and bilingual education in Turkey, the only language of instruction in the education system is Turkish. The Kurdish population of Turkey has long sought to have Kurdish included as a language of instruction in public schools as well as a subject. The Ministry of National Education has started the Kurdish elective courses process, but unfortunately Turkey does not have basic foundations for the teaching of these elective courses. Kurdish is permitted as a subject in universities, but in reality there are only a few pioneer courses. One of the fundamental obstacles for the solution of Kurdish question in Turkey is the right to education the mother tongue [21]. Any solution to the problem seems impossible unless Turkey recognizes Kurdish cultural rights and meets their demands for education in the mother tongue. The Kurdish question is basically a matter of democracy [22]

4. Islamic Education

The most dramatic consequence of Chinese policy about religion has been the near total suppression of Islam and Islamic education since the 1950s. Most Uyghurs have acquired and transmit Islamic knowledge through the embodied performances of day-to-day living and life-cycle events [23]. With the exception of the period 1980-1990, Islamic learning, philosophy and law, have been traditionally practiced and passed on by the ulemas. Islamic heritage, such as madrasas and traditional living areas including the Old Islamic city of Kashgar, one of the best preserved and most endangered Islamic cities in Central Asia, was consistently destroyed under the name of development [24]. Religious institutions have closed down and Islamic training is now under state control. Each county has officially sanctioned madrasas and the Islamic Association of China is now the only place for training official religious clerks. Publications of religious texts have decreased in number as well as in importance.

5. Government Official Policies

In the past ten years the Chinese government has made it a priority to expand bilingual education in Xinjiang. Official education documents state that the main purpose of minority education is to maintain political stability and the unity of all nationalities. China's language policy both suppresses and marginalizes the Uyghur [25] and it has become increasingly reactive and tied to geopolitical considerations [26]. The Uyghur community is caught in a dilemma. The expansion of educational

opportunities has made Uyghurs more like Han Chinese. The expansion of Chinese language education is becoming both the best and the worst thing for China's unity and stability. It is a potentially valuable tool, but also a source of potentially great conflict. An example of official policy that negatively affects identity is the educational policy that has gradually moved classroom instruction from Uyghur-medium to bilingual to Mandarin only, leaving many illiterate in their own language. This link between ethnic awareness and Islam means that any restriction on Islam is seen as an attack on Uyghur identity. "Identity is inseparable from place, as is language. The relationship between language and place is no less fluid than that between identity and place... Language is often cited as a major component in the maintenance of a separate ethnic identity, and language undoubtedly constitutes the single most characteristic feature of ethnic identity" [27].

The Uyghur language has been gradually restricted and narrowed. In 1949, the Arab alphabet was used, but changed to a Cyrillic alphabet when Russia became an ally. When the break in the Sino-Soviet relationship occurred in 1958, China was led to abandon this alphabet in favor of the Latin alphabet, which lasted only a short time. The latest change is the shift from the Latin script to a modified version of the Arabic alphabet in 1984. Thus four changes occurred between 1949 and 1984 [28] and as a result, public texts (newspapers, official documents, even street signs) have changed overnight, rendering many illiterate. Educational policies that have moved classroom instruction to Mandarin leave many unable to participate in educational opportunities, jobs and public life. Minority languages are considered noncompetitive and, compared to Chinese, useless and backward. One official stated that minority languages in Xinjiang contain only limited amounts of information and cannot express some more advanced knowledge. As Uyghur language expert Dwyer indicated, this assertion is simply untrue, as every language is capable of simple and complex expressions in every kind of field, it just needs proper language planning [29]. The language of Uyghurs' formal school education has not only had an effect on their perceptions of language learning, but has also created ethnic and cultural divisions among people of the same origins. Uyghurs are also increasingly unable to communicate with their elders, understand their traditional songs, or read their ancient texts. This problem has been more exacerbated with every mandated orthographic script change. The aggressive expansion of Chinese teaching in Xinjiang is a significant cause for consternation among Uyghurs, who fear extinction of their mother tongue and culture. There is nothing wrong with learning a second language, especially one in such common usage that can open so many doors. Trilingualism is clearly an inevitable and promising response to the language needs of Uyghur students. Uyghurs have the right to learn their own language, but they also have the right to learn the dominant language, Chinese, and the global language, English.

Education has become a key tool of Sinization. First of all, religious education has undergone remarkable changes and the most dramatic consequence of Chinese policy has been the near total suppression of Islam since the 1950s. Religious repression has gradually intensified since 9/11. However, most Uyghurs have acquired and transmit Islamic knowledge through the day-to-day living and life-cycle events and thus the practices of religion among the Uyghurs in Xinjiang became limited to private sphere and morality. By using the term bilingual, the Chinese government has implemented a Mandarin-only education system in Xinjiang and thus is threatening the language based Uyghur culture and Uyghur identity.

6. Conclusion

Education in Xinjiang from the late Qing through the Republican era [30], and the People's Republic of China [31] shows some continuities. This idea, of Chinese language school education, can be traced back to the late Qing era, when administrators failed to educate Uyghur elites in Chinese. In general, Uyghur_educational perceptions have gone through changes, from traditional Muslim religious education to the national secular educational system. Along the way, Uyghur language and Islam have attempted to sustain a vital position in maintaining Uyghur ethnic identity.

Policies towards Xinjiang, including education, language and religion, are similar to the policies that have been directed towards Tibet, or even harsher than Tibet, because of the Uyghurs' Islamic tradition, international political environments and the war on terror. "Regulation of education and religion in China is used not only to control religious practices but also to express the boundaries of tolerance and repression. It is also used to isolate resistance and confer privileges on people and communities loyal to the state. It promises tolerance for the compliant and repression for the resistant" [32]. The restrictions on education, Islam and use of language also threaten Uyghurs' ability to preserve cultural and ethnic symbols and distinctions. These restrictions represent a threat to the cultural identity as Muslims as well as to the cultural identity as Uyghurs. This link between ethnic awareness and Islam means that any restriction on Islam can be seen as an attack on Uyghur identity. The Chinese government is hostile to any attempts by Uyghurs to promote their identity and culture, considering that these attempts are made to advance Uyghur separatism, terrorism and Xinjiang independence. This same policy has been seen in the past in Turkey with regards to Kurdish language, education and recognition of Kurdish cultural aspirations. Changes in political views have led to more recognition, although slow and incomplete. In China, authoritarian governance with little evidence of consultation and involvement of the indigenous people, including the teachers, students and parents themselves in decisions that affect their present and future, have led to denial of fundamental rights. In the US, the situation is different in that rights to language and heritage have been enshrined in law and attempts are continually made to implement them, although not always successfully. Thorny issues remain for minority rights for preservation of culture, education, language, religion and opportunities in the job market.

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