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WORKING PAPER SERIES NO. 61

# **Making States, Displacing Peoples**

## A Comparative Perspective of Xinjiang and Tibet in the People's Republic of China

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May 2010

Paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Science by Coursework in Forced Migration at the University of Oxford

Refugee Studies Centre  
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University of Oxford

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## Abbreviations

CCPP:	Chinese Communist Party
ETR:	Eastern Turkestan Republic
GLF:	Great Leap Forward
PLA:	People's Liberation Army
PRC:	People's Republic of China
SCO:	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
TAR:	Tibet Autonomous Region
TIRET:	Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan
WUC:	World Uyghur Congress
XUAR:	Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

# 1 Introduction: Human displacement in Xinjiang from 1949 onwards

## **Problematizing human displacement in China: Xinjiang, nation-building and forced migration**

For several decades, and especially since the emergence of the “refugee crisis” in the 1970s, scholars have studied the production of refugees, and have sought to determine the main causes of this phenomenon. Writing about the formation of new states as a “refugee-generating process”, Aristide Zolberg proposes an explanation for forced migration in the modern world (Zolberg 1998). According to him, the creation of new states, a common occurrence in the context of decolonisation, has been a major refugee-producing process, even more so than interstate conflicts. State formation, in his view, encompasses both processes of state-building (how the state ensures its sovereignty over a peculiar territory) and of nation-building, or, in Arjun Appadurai’s words, “the people production” necessary for the power of the state (Soguk 1999:39).

The People’s Republic of China (PRC), founded in 1949 after the victory of the People’s Liberation Army (Chinese Communist Party) over the Nationalists (Guomindang), is a relatively new state that had to go through these two processes. Indeed, after the Communists’ victory, one of the main issues faced by the new government was “how to define ‘China’ – and the boundaries of China and the composition of the Chinese nation in particular” (Jian 2007:130). If the eastern part of China had been unified for centuries and formed a relatively harmonious national bloc, the remote regions, such as Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia, were more problematic, as they were essentially populated by ethnic minorities, far from the reach of the central government, and thus represented a potential threat to the territorial integrity of the new state. Unlike in Zolberg’s depiction, Chinese state- and nation-building did not involve any systematic forced displacement of populations under the supervision of the state. Nevertheless, in the context of the construction of the Chinese nation-state, forced displacement did occur, and is still occurring; but not merely as the result of the forcible incorporation of remote minorities’ areas. It is also the result of long-term processes, such as internal colonialism and marginalisation of local populations. Therefore, the central aim of this study is to question and understand the complex link between nation-state building and human displacement in the PRC.

In this perspective of human displacement, it is interesting to compare two regions of the PRC, Xinjiang and Tibet, which have very similar features in terms of historical relations with China, geographical location and geostrategic interests for the PRC, and claims to political independence. Yet, whereas the Tibetan case is widely known in Western societies and the Tibetan diaspora is well-established and politically active, Xinjiang is an almost unknown region, and the Uyghur diaspora remains barely visible on the international stage. The Communist invasion of Tibet is known for having engendered the flight of many Tibetans across the Sino-Indian border, including their spiritual and political leader, the Dalai Lama. By contrast, much less attention is given to the fate of the

Uyghurs and their attempts to leave Xinjiang. The scarcity of data concerning Uyghurs' movements is a powerful indicator of the low concern of the international community for this situation, despite some notable similarities with that of Tibet. Consequently, the difference of "celebrity" between these two cases will have to be questioned.

While the imposition of Han rule in Xinjiang did not lead to massive refugee flows, human displacement has also affected this region. According to Yitzhak Shichor, there have been three major waves of human displacement from Xinjiang, in reaction to deteriorating conditions inside the PRC, or to the re-opening of the frontiers (Shichor 2007a). The first wave followed the Communists' seizure of Xinjiang in late 1949, and involved mainly Uyghur political leaders and intellectuals, who fled to Turkey through India. The second was a reaction to the extreme hardships of the Great Leap Forward (GLF) in 1962, and drove more than 60,000 Uyghurs out of China to the USSR. The last major outflow has occurred since the late 1980s and the post-Mao Reform Era, triggered by the re-opening of the frontiers for trade purposes.

However, in the Chinese context of state formation and nation-building, the notion of displacement itself needs to be re-examined. Displacement can be conceptualised as a political and social phenomenon, and not merely as a physical displacement. Indeed, two simultaneous and paradoxical types of displacement can be highlighted in the Chinese context: first, a pragmatic inclusion of the 55 minorities in the Chinese nation, that is, a forced displacement from the margins of the Chinese territory to the core of the nation; and second, an exclusion of these same ethnic minorities through a political and social displacement to the margins of the Chinese body politic and society. In turn, the glaring contradiction between an inclusive discourse and an exclusive reality has led increasingly to strong distrust and resentment among the Uyghur community in Xinjiang, and fostered physical displacement.

The impacts of nation-state building on human displacement are the central concern of this study, but it will be also crucial to understand how the special characteristics of the nation-state in formation and the policies implemented to reach this goal impact on the displaced population itself. Indeed, states do not only displace people, but also shape the forms of the community in exile. It is a long-term relationship that does not stop at the physical borders of the state. In the case of Xinjiang, sixty years after its seizure by the Chinese, the Uyghur diaspora still challenges Chinese sovereignty in the region, highlighting the failure of nation-building in the PRC. Therefore, the relationship between nation-state building and generation of refugee flows must be examined from both angles: if the process of nation-building impacts on human displacement, the community in exile, in its turn, also impacts on this process by playing a political role, thus challenging the state's sovereignty, and triggering political responses from the Chinese government.

The value of this study lies in its attempt to better understand the mechanisms of forced migration in the context of state- and nation-building, and to identify the mutual impacts of states and refugees and understand their long-term relationship. In the case of the PRC,

this relationship is of particular interest, as it has lasted for almost sixty years. Chinese officials claim that the process of nation-building finished in the late 1950s but, clearly, two regions – Tibet and Xinjiang – still resist and reject Chinese sovereignty over their territory. Thus, it is a case showing the long-lasting effects and long-term dynamics of nation-state building.

Moreover, the interest of this study lies also in its originality, both in the choice of the topic and in the reasoning. Indeed, Xinjiang is not a widely known case, and few scholarly articles are devoted to this region. However, in parallel with the increasing interest in China and its growing influence on Central Asia, one can observe a rising interest in Xinjiang in the literature. This is also linked with the greater attention paid to the Islamic world, especially Islamic separatism. Although the Uyghur resistance has very limited connections to radical Islamism and Islamic terrorism (Castets 2004:35), this potential threat to the Chinese state has been widely commented on since 2001. However, while there is a far from negligible number of studies about Xinjiang, it has seldom, if ever, been addressed in terms of human displacement and forced migration. In this lies the originality of this study: although forced migration is not obvious in Xinjiang, as the Chinese state never expelled a whole segment of the population in order to build a cohesive Chinese nation, it did nevertheless occur, but as the result of a long-term process which must be examined. The comparison with the role of the Tibetan community in exile allows a better understanding of the dynamics and impacts of nation-building in the Chinese context.

### **Human displacement in Xinjiang, from 1949 onwards**

#### **The displacement wave following the communist “peaceful liberation” of Xinjiang**

The first wave of human displacement from Xinjiang in 1949 did not reach the scale of a mass exodus, and only involved a few hundred individuals (Shichor 2007a). Nonetheless, this first wave of displacement has some importance, as it is considered as a founding event by the Uyghur exile community. The origin of this outflow is highly political as it results from the split within the Uyghur nationalist movement.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Xinjiang was characterised by a strong political instability. After the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the rule of the Chinese warlords was particularly harsh towards the ethnic minorities, stimulating Uyghur nationalism (Castets 2004:12). In the 1940s, the growing influence of the neighbouring Soviet Union led to a long-term split in the Uyghur nationalist movement. Henceforth, communist nationalists opposed the pan-Turkish and anti-communist nationalists. In the aftermath of the Communists’ seizure of Xinjiang, the new political landscape triggered the first human displacement wave from China’s north-west. This flow was composed mainly of former Uyghur political leaders and activists from the pan-Turkish and anti-communist nationalist movement - among them some members of the short-lived governing coalition from the first years of the East Turkestan Republic (1944-1949), including Isa Yusuf Alptekin and Mehmet Emin Bugra. Fearing political persecution, these individuals left Xinjiang in late 1949, fleeing the wave of arrests launched by the CCP against potential political opponents. Because of their anti-communist background

as “rightist” political figures, they could not turn toward Western Turkestan (the present republics of Central Asia) and ask for asylum in the Soviet Union. Instead, they fled to Tibet, India or Pakistan, where they were considered as political refugees. In most cases, they did not stay in their country of first asylum, but sought to organise collectively, with the assistance of the UNHCR (Besson 1998:3), resettlement in a third country. The principal country of resettlement turned out to be Turkey, with pan-Turkish ideology indubitably playing an important role in this arrangement<sup>1</sup>.

Although it was small-scale, this first wave of displacement from Xinjiang has a very special resonance among the Uyghur exile community. According to Frédérique-Jeanne Besson:

“This 1949 migration is symbolically important as it plays the role of original exodus for the Uyghur communities expatriated outside Central Asia. It is considered as the starting point of a chronology of the exodus and celebrated as a national event. It is the main origin of the Uyghurs’ expatriation outside Central Asia and of the formation of the ‘Western diaspora’ communities.” (Besson 1998:2)

Therefore, this first wave is also emblematic of the long-term fragmentation of the Uyghur community in exile between communists and anti-communists, Central-Asian and Western diaspora, which lasted until the end of the Cold War. Personified by several well-known nationalist political leaders such as Isa Yusuf Alptekin, this wave symbolises also the nation in exile and the Uyghur political struggle against Chinese rule in Xinjiang.

### **The displacement wave in the late 1950s – early 1960s**

The second wave of human displacement in Xinjiang occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and represents the largest movement of population across the Sino-Soviet border in the twentieth century. The estimated numbers involved vary significantly according to the source, from 60,000 to 200,000, with a peak of 62,000 refugees for 1962 only (Benson and Svanberg 1998; Dreyer 1976; McMillen 1979; Roberts 2007). This flight of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities from Xinjiang was mainly for economic reasons, but also political ones.

Indeed, although on a small scale, political exile continued throughout the 1950s. Several nationalist militants continued to leave Xinjiang for Central Asia or Turkey, according to their political affiliation (communist / anti-communist) (Besson 1998:3). From the mid-1950s, the flight to the Soviet Union accelerated, following the implementation of new communist policies in Xinjiang and the rise of tensions between the USSR and the PRC. After the “Hundred Flowers Movement” (1956-1957), political and cultural repression ensued during the “Anti-Rightist Campaign” (1957-1958) and drove further exile to the

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<sup>1</sup> In 1952, under the supervision of the UNHCR, around 2,000 oriental Turkestanese (or Uyghur) refugees from India and Pakistan were granted asylum in Turkey. The next year, another 900 refugees from Kashmir and Pakistan followed the same path (Besson 1998:3). Both contributed to the emergence of the Turkish Uyghur community – mainly based in Ankara and in the province of Kayseri – which is estimated to be around 10,000 persons nowadays.



Soviet Union. Pro-Soviet Uyghur officials were accused of “local nationalism”, and purged and sent to “re-education camps”; Uyghur intellectuals were singled out for “nationality chauvinism”; and the CCP’s nationalities policy became increasingly radicalised. As a result, thousands of families fled to the USSR, claiming Soviet citizenship or political refugee status (Roberts 2007:206).

However, the reasons for the mass exodus were largely economic: the implementation of the GLF had resulted in an economic disaster, with food shortages and famine across China. As early as 1959, thousands of individuals swelled the wave of refugees fleeing the hardships of forced collectivisation. 1962 marked the peak of the refugee crisis: between 60,000 and 70,000 Uyghurs and Kazakhs left China and poured into Central Asia (mainly Kazakhstan) in the first five months of the year. They were mostly from the northern regions of the Ili Prefecture,<sup>2</sup> and were either Soviet-oriented or anti-Han intellectuals, or herdsmen or peasants fleeing economic hardship. In a context of deepening of the Sino-Soviet split, this event was largely exploited by Moscow<sup>3</sup>.

Reluctant at first to recognise this as mass exodus, the Chinese authorities tried to use propaganda to prevent flight. In May 1962, in the face of increasingly massive flows, they decided to close the Sino-Soviet border. Henceforth, cross-border movements of population were prohibited or closely controlled: a buffer zone was created and militarised, and the local population was largely relocated in other areas further from the border. For the peoples of Xinjiang, flight was no longer an option.

This mass exodus greatly embarrassed the Chinese government, as it was threatening its sovereignty over this remote region. Furthermore, such a large flow of refugees was highlighting the regime’s failure in both the GLF and the integration of ethnic minorities into the nation-state. Silent on this event the first two years following it, the government waited until 1964 before mentioning the incident in the media, denouncing the role of the USSR and simply noting this event as a result of foreign influences (Benson and Svanberg 1998:137). In reality, in addition to the severe hardships endured by the population of Xinjiang during the “bitter years” of the GLF, the reasons for their flight were also forced acculturation and assimilation and the steady arrival of Han settlers, appropriating land and natural resources.

For the Uyghur community in exile, this mass exodus is important in the history of the formation of the “Central-Asian Uyghur diaspora”. Mainly resettled in Kazakhstan, these emigrants situated at the border of their country of origin were to play a critical role. Although contacts between the two regions have been cut since the closure of the border in 1962, this Uyghur community in exile was to be of primary importance for the

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<sup>2</sup> The Ili Prefecture is a northwest subdivision of the XUAR, bordering Kazakhstan.

<sup>3</sup> Broadcasting at the region from Central Asia, the USSR had launched a large propaganda campaign in 1961, criticizing the GLF, “telling about the better life of the minorities on the other side of the border and emphasising ethnic bonds” (McMillen 1979:122). Meanwhile, the Soviet consulate in Xinjiang greatly facilitated visa procedures and issued antedated Soviet passports to minority nationals.

organisation of the diaspora and its political struggle, and also for the circulation of information between the Western world, the Western diaspora and Xinjiang.

### **The displacement wave from the late 1980s onwards**

The last wave of displacement was spread over a much larger period, from the late 1980s onwards, and involved mainly political refugees. Whereas data about the first two waves is very scarce, information about this most recent wave is both much more available and accessible, mainly because of the new means of information and communication – such as the Internet – and the proliferation of Uyghur associations in exile acting as go-between. However, this information is also much more fragmented and individualised<sup>4</sup> and it is difficult to obtain global numbers of Uyghur political refugees for this period. Nonetheless, this third wave is fundamental to our study, as it highlights the relative failure of the Chinese nation-building process in Xinjiang, even after having been implemented for almost sixty years.

This new flow of displacement has been rendered possible partly because of the major changes that occurred in the world at the end of the 1980s. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold World and of the ideological divide between West and East drastically altered the geopolitical situation in Xinjiang. One major consequence was a gradual reopening of the Sino-Soviet border from the late 1980s. If the increase of economic exchanges favoured trans-border movements, the technological changes in terms of information and communication also created new possibilities of exile for Uyghurs (Roberts 1996).

The internal political changes since the late 1970s were even more important in shaping this new wave of displacement. After the death of Mao in 1976 and the official end of the Cultural Revolution, a radical change toward a greater tolerance was considered as absolutely necessary in order to avoid popular unrest in ethnic areas (especially Tibet and Xinjiang) after the hardships and the wounds of the Cultural Revolution (Bovingdon 2004:125). Consequently, the Reform Era in Xinjiang was, more than anything, a period of revitalisation of Uyghur ethnic and cultural identity. Students and intellectuals started organising cultural events and associations promoting Uyghur language, history, literature and arts, which rapidly turned out to be the vectors of Uyghur nationalism's revival. Throughout the second half of the 1980s, the demonstrations in Xinjiang multiplied and progressively raised political questions such as political autonomy and Uyghurs' rights.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, many reports carried out by human rights associations, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, or by diaspora associations give an account of the difficulties faced by individual Uyghur political refugees (such as imprisonment, executions, extraditions, *refoulement*). Even the numbers of the members of the diasporic communities are debated and vary significantly between host governments and Uyghur associations.

However, 1989 dramatically changed the order of things. After the events of Tiananmen, an authoritative clampdown affected the whole country and the minorities' areas particularly. It involved a complete reversal of the situation and of Beijing's treatment of the unrest in Xinjiang. From that moment, the criminalisation and repression of the public expression of Uyghur cultural and religious identity fostered the creation of underground militant groups (Castets 2004:25). Therefore, the 1980s is a critically important period for understanding the third displacement wave, as it led to the regeneration of Uyghur nationalist opposition and the creation of organisations in exile fighting for more autonomy in Xinjiang. In this context, the third wave of displacement occurred as a reaction to the intolerance of the Chinese regime.

The 1990s saw further strained relations between Beijing and the population of Xinjiang. From the Baren insurrection<sup>5</sup> in April 1990 to the Gulja riots and the bomb attack<sup>6</sup> in Urumqi in February 1997, the Uyghur nationalist movement shifted from the peaceful expression of a sense of cultural identity to much more radical modes of action, in an attempt to break the media blackout and attract international attention (Castets 2004:27). As for the Party-state in Beijing, it launched the "Strike Hard Campaign" in 1996, officially to counter crime, but targeting especially so-called "separatist nationalism" and "religious illegal activities" (Castets 2004:28) in Xinjiang. This political crackdown, subsequently renewed every year, is a major factor in the ongoing generation of political refugee flows towards Central Asia or Western countries. Thus, this third wave of displacement is composed mainly of students and intellectuals involved - or alleged to be involved - in nationalist political activities, fearing the repression of the Chinese state but also willing to continue the struggle for Uyghurs' rights from abroad.

Because the opening of the borders has facilitated individual migration, most of them flee to the neighbouring countries of Central Asia. Data about the Uyghur diaspora in Central Asia once again varies greatly according to the source: the Uyghur community was estimated by the 1989 Soviet census as around 180,000 in Kazakhstan (or 500,000, according to the Uyghur associations), 40,000 in Kyrgyzstan (or 250,000) and 5,000 in Turkmenistan (or 20,000) (Castets 2004:31). Refugee flows towards Western countries remain moderate, but have increased since the 1990s. Although Turkey or Saudi Arabia are the main countries of asylum for Uyghur migrants, the most militant tend to choose new destinations such as the US, Canada, Australia, Germany, and Scandinavia.

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<sup>5</sup> The Baren insurrection, in 1990, was an attempt to liberate Xinjiang from Chinese rule, or at least to attract international attention to the Uyghur situation. On 5 April, the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party launched a *jihad* against the Chinese troops in the region of Baren. The PLA easily put down the insurrection during the night. However, for Beijing, it is a warning which indicates the resurgence of armed separatist movements in Xinjiang.

<sup>6</sup> The bus bombing in Urumqi occurred on 25 February (Deng Xiaoping's funeral), a few days after the bloody repression of the riots in Gulja, and was attributed to the East Turkestan National Unity Alliance.

Western countries have become a crucial alternative to Central Asia, since Uyghur political refugees are no longer safe in the states neighbouring China. Indeed, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)<sup>7</sup>, created to prevent separatism, extremism and terrorism, contains extradition clauses concerning alleged separatists.<sup>8</sup>

Compared to the previous waves, this one has a new significance, as it clearly embodies resistance to Chinese rule, and unites the different brands of nationalists. This movement is more individualised and more politicised: people leaving Xinjiang have a well-founded fear of being persecuted by the Chinese police because of their (alleged) political activities (Amnesty International 1999, 2004).

### **The change in the dynamics of human displacement from Xinjiang**

The fragmentation of human displacement from Xinjiang into three distinct waves since 1949 is partly the result of the very tight control exerted by the Chinese state over movements of population. After the PRC's creation, people were given an internal "compulsory order of residence" via the hukou system; while crossing the borders was especially difficult, as travel documents and visas were extremely hard to obtain. In the minority areas along China's international borders, this control of population movements was even tighter, since, to Chinese leaders, emigration represented a high risk of instability. This was especially the case in the context of Sino-Soviet tensions, when Beijing feared that the settlement of Uyghur exiles in the Soviet Union, just on the other side of the border, would foster political activism, claims for independence and the formation of armed groups. Therefore, the closure of this border in 1962 clearly reflected a "no-exit policy": instead of forced migration, Chinese state- and nation-building led to forced residence.

However, the wave initiated in the 1990s is radically different. The end of the Cold War, the launch of the Reform Era and economic imperatives pushed the Chinese government to reopen the borders. Increasing trade between China and Central Asia enabled individual Uyghurs and members of other minorities to cross the frontier; although there has been no mass exodus, because of the still very tight management of population by the Chinese government. Part of this movement was motivated by the search for better living conditions (Roberts 1996); in the main, however, it remains largely a political emigration.

One can identify three major differences between the first two waves of human displacement and the last one.

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<sup>7</sup> The SCO is an intergovernmental organisation created in 2001 by the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

<sup>8</sup> For more information about conditions of asylum in Central Asia, consult the following reports available on Refworld: Eurasianet (2004), Immigration Board of Canada (1999), Minority Rights Group International (2008a, 2008b), Refugees International (2008).

Three new processes are at work:

- The politicisation of Uyghur emigration: displacement since the 1990s is mainly a reaction to the Chinese political crackdown on the expression of Uyghur cultural and religious identity in the late 1980s. Unlike the 1949 wave, fleeing Uyghurs are no longer divided along political lines. It is also a younger and very politicised population: many are militants or students involved in the 1980s revitalisation of Uyghur culture. They tend to join Uyghur organisations abroad in order to fight for the Uyghur cause and thus choose new destinations such as Western countries where advocacy activities are easier to set up and where international attention is easier to attract than in Central Asia. This wave is much more critical of the Chinese regime than the previous ones: it points to the relative failure of Beijing's political programme of inclusion of ethnic minorities into the Chinese nation, calling into question the very process of nation-building in China after almost sixty years of its implementation.
- The change in the official discourse of the Chinese government, from an inclusive rhetoric to an exclusive discourse. From the 1950s until the 1990s, the official discourse maintained by the Chinese government was that all the 55 ethnic minorities living on the territory of the PRC were part of the Chinese nation, which was one and indivisible. This inclusive rhetoric was intended to justify Chinese rule in remote regions such as Xinjiang, Tibet or Inner Mongolia – although in fact, these 55 minorities were far from being full citizens. However, from the end of the 1980s, the official discourse completely changed and separatist activities were no longer silenced. On the one hand, with the succession of demonstrations and riots in Xinjiang in the 1990s and the technological advances in the field of communication (such as the Internet), the Chinese government could no longer maintain the media blackout on the Uyghur situation, nor deny interethnic tensions and separatist desires. Yet on the other hand, the publicisation of political and social unrest in Xinjiang was used strategically by Beijing to justify further repression. Thus a new exclusive discourse emerged, marginalising ethnic identities and criminalising cultural and religious expression. The “separatists” or “splittists” were no longer entitled to be members of the Chinese nation and had to be excluded, thus legitimising the political repression in Xinjiang through the “Strike Hard Campaign”. After 9/11, the publicisation of Uyghur separatism was further emphasised through a communication campaign launched by the Chinese government: waging a “war on terror”, Beijing denounced the “terrorist” activities of Uyghur separatists, thus finding a pretext to legitimise its policy in Xinjiang in the eyes of the international community. However, this change in the official discourse not only served the interests of the Chinese government: the Uyghur community in exile also benefited from the full recognition by the Chinese government of what was happening in Xinjiang. It gave them some credibility in the eyes of the international community regarding violations of human rights in Xinjiang.

- The transformation of the Uyghur communities in exile and the formation of a homogenous Uyghur diaspora. With the new flow of refugees in the 1990s, the Uyghur diaspora progressively reached a certain level of homogeneity, which was crucially lacking until then and, thus, preventing any coordination of advocacy activities. One of the main factors behind homogenisation was the end of the Cold War and the subsequent disappearance of the deep ideological fracture between communist and anti-communist refugees in the two blocs (Castets 2004:33). Another factor was the hardening of Chinese policy in Xinjiang and the consequent flight of nationalist militants: unlike the 1960s wave, these arrived with a political project and new information about the situation in Xinjiang, thus renewing the links between the old diaspora and the country of origin. This recent wave of political refugees is distributed among the different communities in different countries and “acts on them as a homogenising factor as it shares a common history and creates its own networks from one community to another” (Besson 1998:6). Moreover, since the 2000s, the Uyghur diaspora has employed a strategic redeployment from countries of first asylum to target countries - such as the UK, France, the US or Canada – for the sake of better visibility on the international scene.

These changes in the dynamics of human displacement from Xinjiang demonstrate that, despite sixty years of incorporation into the PRC, Xinjiang is still contesting Chinese sovereignty. More crucially, it reveals that the process of nation-state building is a long-term process that is still at work in the PRC and still producing refugee flows. It also shows that minority communities in exile and states of origin are mutually constitutive, and are bound in a long-term relationship that impacts on both. Therefore, this study will look at these different processes involved in triggering human displacement in Xinjiang.

In the first chapter, after a review of the existing literature about nation-state building and the generation of refugee flows, we will examine the transition from the Chinese Empire to the Chinese nation-state in Xinjiang and the challenge of borderland peoples. Then, in the second chapter, we will look more specifically at the implementation of the programme of nation-building by the Chinese government in minority areas, and how Uyghurs responded to this programme. In the third chapter, we will demonstrate that displacement from Xinjiang resulted not only from nation-state building, but also from a long-term process of marginalisation and dispossession of Uyghurs. Finally, in the fourth chapter, we will examine the long-term relationship between the Chinese state and the Uyghur community in exile. While the state- and nation-building processes impact on the generation of refugee flows, the government’s policies also shape the forms of the exiled community, which, in turn, continues to challenge the state’s sovereignty.

## 2 State-building in China and the challenge of the borderlands

To understand the process behind generation of refugee flows, Zolberg proposes a wide range of factors and conditions explaining how the emergence of new states can contribute to such a phenomenon. Although contested by Chinese historiography, which emphasises the long-standing existence of China as a nation-state, the emergence of the People's Republic of China in the middle of the twentieth century can be seen as the formation of a new state. Although Chinese civilisation is known to be one of the most ancient, the existence of a Chinese nation-state within the limits of its present territory is much more recent. In this chapter, the aim is to address the link between state formation and human displacement in the PRC, especially as regards the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Referring to Zolberg's contribution, we will show that state-building can have an important impact on human displacement. Then we will demonstrate that borderland peoples are particularly vulnerable in this process of state-building, as they are populations "in between" (Haddad 2003), representing a threat to the state's sovereignty. Finally, we will examine how China faced the challenge of the borderlands.

### **Zolberg's contribution: the formation of new states as a refugee-generating process**

The starting point of this study lies in Aristide Zolberg's analysis of the causes of the generation of refugee flows. Zolberg draws an interesting link between the proliferation of new national states and the emergence of the refugee crisis. According to him, the formation of new states is the most likely environment to produce a wide range of patterns of social conflict that are likely to generate refugee movements. His analysis offers a sound theoretical background for demonstrating the link between the emergence of the PRC as a new state and the production of refugee flows from Xinjiang. Indeed, the major challenge to China's state formation was the presence of several ethnic minorities on its vast territory and the subsequent risk of ethnic conflict. However, ethnic heterogeneity is not sufficient to explain separatism. Indeed, according to Zolberg, "countries marked by an extremely high degree of heterogeneity – that is, whose population is distributed among numerous groups – may be less likely to experience these types of conflicts" (Zolberg et al. 1989:235). In China, the very high proportion of Han Chinese (92%) and the relatively small minorities allow for Han domination and an uneven distribution of power.

As described by Zolberg, such a situation – where a centre, dominated by the majority ethnic group, monopolises the powers and where the periphery, populated by ethnic minorities and culturally distinct, feels alienated by the centre and its very existence as a group threatened, both materially and symbolically – can lead to separatism. Beijing's use of force and military hold on Xinjiang and Uyghurs' lack of political influence in Beijing's politics or even in local decision-making have further exacerbated ethnic conflict and separatism. Indeed, as argued by Zolberg, the main factor triggering a movement for secession is "the coming to power of a military regime inaccessible to the political



influence of the secessionist region or the formation of a wholly ethnically based party” (1989:243). However, the Uyghurs lack crucial international support in their struggle for independence. Without “diplomatic recognition, and financial and legal facilities for the acquisition of weapons” (Zolberg et al. 1989:243), separatist challenges tend simply to produce more problematic refugees, as separatists often evolve into a “target minority” and seek asylum in neighbouring countries.

Therefore, Uyghurs in the PRC very much resemble what Zolberg et al. describe as a “target minority”. In another article, Zolberg presents political persecution against groups to which individuals belong by virtue of “accidents of birth” (1998:27) as a process that arises as “a by-product of the secular transformation of empires into nation-states” (1998:24). He points to the crucial distinction between those persecuted for belonging to certain categories by accident of birth (ethnicity, religion, sex...) and who have “no choice”, and those persecuted for their political opinions because they are citizens of an illiberal state. The Uyghurs can be considered as the second kind of political victims, for whom persecution “mostly occasions relatively small trickles of individual exiles” (1998:27). However, they are not merely political opponents, but also a “target minority”, repressed by Beijing because of their ethnic and cultural identity, in the process of transformation of the Chinese Empire into the Chinese nation-state.

Referring to the work of Hannah Arendt, Zolberg shows that the creation and proliferation of the nation-state formula has led to the emergence of two victim groups: the stateless, and the minorities. Minorities are “persons insisting on a different nationality from the one which the state in which they lived chose to ground its political identity” (Zolberg 1998:28). These minority groups often become targets because of “the inherent dynamics of a political situation that leads inexorably to the designation of certain groups as obstacles to the successful formation of a nation-state” (1998:30). From this perspective, the Uyghurs, by virtue of their ongoing resistance to inclusion in the Chinese nation-state – which resistance has become even more salient since the 1990s – correspond to this kind of minority group.

Therefore, Zolberg’s explanation of refugee flows seems to correspond, to a certain extent, to the Uyghur situation. Nevertheless, the specificity of this case is that no mass exodus has ever taken place (except in 1962), and contemporary human displacement seems to be the product of an historical process, of a long-term strategy of securitisation of the borderlands.

### **The borderland peoples and the state**

The particular situation of the Uyghurs also lies in their geographical location, a feature that they share with the Tibetans: both are situated in the borderlands of China and, as such, constitute a particular threat to the nation-state in the eyes of Beijing. Indeed, according to Barbara J. Morehouse, “a borderland is an area through which a boundary line runs (...) [and] acquire [its] basic identity from interactions with the boundary” (2004:29). Yet, “boundaries are material and metaphorical spatialisations of difference” and, as such, “are indispensable to membership in the nation-state system” (Morehouse



2004:19-20). Because boundaries play such a significant role in the construction of the “self” and the “other”, borderland peoples, remote from the political centre, are often perceived as a threat. By the affirmation and the claims of their ethnic and cultural differences, the Uyghurs threaten the Chinese state: in doing so, the very boundaries of the state are called into question, as if this “spatialisation of difference” was wrong, as if they should not be part of the Chinese nation-state. In expressing their ethnic, cultural and religious identity, they display a greater proximity to the peoples of neighbouring countries of Central Asia, and thereby defy the physical limits of the PRC.

This conception of boundaries as spatialisation of difference and as compartmentalisation of nations and cultures is not without problems. Indeed, “borders and boundaries are deeply embedded in our contemporary regime of knowledge” (Morehouse 2004:19). According to Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, the premise of discontinuity and rupture totally shapes and distorts our conception of the world. They denounce the assumption of “the association of culturally unitary groups with ‘their’ territories”, about the “isomorphism of space, place and culture” (1992:6). According to them, this assumption overlooks the issue of these very borderland peoples and the need to theorise interstitiality and hybridity. The reality is more complex; nations and culture do not stop at the physical borders of states. In fact, “such reified and naturalised national representation are constructed and maintained by states and national elites” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:12). States convey this representation because cultural distinctiveness is produced in a field of power relations: to claim an all-encompassing and unitary culture within a state’s territory, by opposition to the “other”, is to affirm the very existence and distinctiveness of this state. Therefore, borderland peoples, such as the Tibetans or the Uyghurs in the PRC, have to be on one side of the boundary, but seldom have the opportunity to choose which side.

If we return to the concept of minorities as described by Arendt, they appear to be the unintended result of the formation of nation-states and of the contemporary international state system. The international state system as we know it has been constructed since the late eighteenth century on the basis of the nation-state: it allocates individuals to specific territories and therefore can be seen as “a means of organising people” (Haddad 2003:300). Despite the principle of self-determination, this allocation can be arbitrary.

While Haddad argues that refugees “are misfits whose identity fails to correspond to that of any established nation-state, having been pushed into the gaps in the system” (Haddad 2003:7), ethnic minorities caught within a nation-state can be seen as such misfits, either because they do not correspond to any nation-state, or because they have been separated from a corresponding, existing nation-state by an international border. As a result, “the minorities [are] only half stateless; de jure they [belong] to some political body (...); some secondary rights, such as speaking one’s own language and staying in one’s own cultural and social milieu, [are] in jeopardy (...)” (Arendt 1968:276). Borderland peoples are therefore a population “in between”, which has been forcibly included in a state by the requirements of the international state system, but which does not necessarily see its rights fully guaranteed on a par with national citizens.

In the case of the Uyghurs, the lack of an enduring Uyghur state and their geographical position at the edge of China has led to their forcible inclusion within the Chinese nation-state.

### **State-building in China and the challenge of borderlands**

For centuries, the process of state-building in China has been linked with the issue of borderlands. In official Chinese historiography, the process of state formation is described as very ancient; the unity of China within its current geographical limits would have been attained centuries ago. Diana Lary reproduces some of the Chinese official history, “constructed to provide proof of the state’s right to rule” (2007:6):

The credo of the Chinese state describes an ancient process of cultural expansion, as less cultivated peoples accepted high culture from China and became inalienable parts of China. Successive governments (imperial, Guomindang, Communist) have held devoutly to the view that the Chinese state reached close to its current extent in the early stages of the Empire (3rd Century BCE). There have followed more than two millennia of unity, broken only by the aberration of periods of disunity. (Lary 2007:1)

Similarly, Alexander Woodside cites an official document issued by the Chinese State Council in September 1999, arguing that “a unified multiethnic state had existed in China since the unification of the empire in 221 BCE and that such unity had been the ‘main trend’ of Chinese history” (2007:12). However, the contemporary delimitation of the Chinese state is actually quite recent. As argued by Lary, “most of the current borderlands were not fully incorporated into the Chinese state until the eighteenth century” and some of them even “remained outside direct control until quite recently” (2007:1). The formal definition of the state was still in process in the early 2000s: the demarcation of the Sino-Soviet border was only agreed in 2004. Moreover, the extension of the Chinese state did not occur through a peaceful cultural expansion, but rather has been characterised by a “heavy dependence on the force of arms” (Lary 2007:2).

This forcible expansion has often been regarded as permanent only on the incoming (i.e. Chinese) side; on the other side, that of the indigenous peoples of the borderlands, the Chinese presence either remains contested or is seen as an occupation (Lary 2007:2).

Territory is the first main criterion of statehood (with population and sovereignty). It is also inherently linked with identity: territory is a “space to which identity is attached by a distinctive group who hold or cover that territory and who desire to have a full control over it for the group benefit” (Knight 1994:216). Therefore, borderlands can be seen as potential threats to the centre, because they are at the crossroads between civilisations, cultures and ethnic identities: as such, adherence to the national identity does not go without saying. For this reason, China’s borderlands have always been an object of particular attention for the Chinese regime, and yet, at the same time, they have been “too big and too various for any political centre, even a semi-mythic one, to control” (Woodside 2007:12).

However, although claimed as “integral parts” of China, two borderlands were particularly problematic in the process of state-building: Xinjiang and Tibet. Since the incorporation of these two regions into the PRC in the early 1950s, Chinese sovereignty has often been challenged by local populations through riots and demonstrations, exile and political opposition, as well as through everyday resistance. Uyghurs and Tibetans refuse the loss of their autonomy and, above all, their forced inclusion in the Chinese nation, which requires them to abandon their ethnic and religious identity.

### **3 Nation-building in China and the forced inclusion of minorities in the Chinese nation**

The construction of the Chinese nation-state as we know it today has been a key concern for the Chinese government over the past half century. This historical process, which – contrary to what Chinese officials claim – is still at work, needs to be examined, especially in relation to the third wave of displacement from the 1990s onwards. Indeed, the construction of the nation implies a wide range of policies and attitudes from the political leaders, which have a determinant impact on the process itself. As Gardner Bovingdon argues,

states’ nation-building strategies themselves also bear heavily on outcomes. The choice of state structure, the degree to which the national identities states propose hew to characteristics of majorities, and the policies chosen to protect cultural differences all contribute to the success or failure of the enterprise (2002:277).

In this chapter, we will try to demonstrate that, as well as the simple physical inclusion of Xinjiang within the Chinese state, the process of nation-building in the PRC, the way that the CCP has implemented it, and the official discourse attached to it, have direct and long-term implications in terms of human displacement. First, we must examine the notions of nation and nation-building in relation to the process of state-building, in order to understand why it has been such a central concern for Chinese political leaders since the early twentieth century. Then, we will illustrate how the Communist regime in China handled the process of nation-building, especially as regards ethnic minorities. And finally, we will look at the Uyghur case to demonstrate that – contrary to what the Chinese government proclaims – this process is not finished and that the concept of “One Chinese Nation” is still very much challenged in contemporary China, notably by Uyghur displacement.

## **States, nations, minorities and displacement**

For a whole century, nation-building has been a major and constant concern for China's political leaders. As Bovingdon argues, "the CCP leadership has spent decades pursuing the project initiated by its predecessors in the KMT,<sup>9</sup> that of further transforming the peoples and lands of the vast and heterogeneous Qing empire into a unified nation-state" (2002:275). Indeed, the notion of nation is central to the contemporary international state system, because of its close connection with the notion of sovereignty. Sovereignty is recognised as the basic rule of the international state system: it means both "external authority and internal control", the state "simultaneously fac[ing] outward at other states and inward at its population" (Haddad 2003:299-300). Population is thus a major element of a state's sovereignty, especially in a world which hinges so heavily on the model of the nation-state. However, the "bounded presence of 'representable citizen subjects' never simply exists in itself" (Soguk 1999:39). From this perspective, Nevzat Soguk considers that the most fundamental problem of the state is the following:

It is a problem of how to inscribe, stabilize, and render effective a certain figure of the citizen that the modern state would represent and on the basis of which the modern state would claim to effect its sovereignty, its powers, and indeed its right to rule over a territorial inside – the domestic community of citizens. Arjun Appadurai calls this the 'people production' necessary for the powers of the state, a task that is always carried out in uncertain grounds. (Soguk 1999:39)

For any new state, "people production" is thus fundamental to ensuring both the sovereignty and the legitimacy of the state. The process of nation-building is aimed at producing this "citizen subject". However, the construction of a nation-state is not an easy process, as a perfect fit between a homogenous population – a nation – and a territory – a state – seldom occurs on its own. "Most states, in contrast, have plural societies, with minorities." (Knight 1994:220) According to Knight, identity linked to a certain part of a state territory can differ from the national identity and, thus, this "sub-state group politico-territorial identity" constitutes an expression of self-determination (1994:221). In this situation,

"The challenge for those who believe in 'the nation', or at least in a national identity, is to get people within the state who have a different – minority – sense of self to accept the merit of unity with diversity. This challenge presents grave difficulties within numerous States in many parts of the world, where demands for separation and autonomy, or secession and independence, are considerable." (1994:222)

Therefore, minorities represent a real challenge for nation-states, even more so where these nation-states are not so keen to tolerate "unity with diversity". When minorities carry their own "sub-state group politico-territorial identity" – which is likely to be the case in regions recently integrated into the state – then the nation is challenged and the sovereignty of the state is under threat. Indeed, the sovereignty of the state also hinges on

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<sup>9</sup> The KMT (Kuomintang, or Guomindang in *pinyin*, the international standard of romanised Chinese), is the name of the Chinese Nationalist Party created by Sun Yat-sen in 1911 after the Revolution.

its internal authority, meaning its ability to govern effectively and, hence, to be formally recognised as the only source of public authority within the borders of its territory. This form of sovereignty implies legitimacy, emanating from the citizens, or political community. However, as R.L. Doty argues, “when it is no longer clear who makes up the nation, a state’s internal sovereignty and the existence of the state itself is threatened” (1996:122). From this perspective, minorities can either become targets for persecution or be expelled from the state’s territory – both situations leading to human displacement – as they are seen as an obstacle to the process of nation-building. However, the presence of minorities within state territory does not necessarily lead to human displacement. In order to claim their sovereignty over minority areas, states need to consider these minorities as part of the nation, whether they choose to tolerate the expression of ethnic identity within the nation or not. In a state where around 60% of the territory is populated by ethnic minorities, the PRC has opted resolutely for this strategy.

### **Minorities policy in China and the “One Chinese Nation”**

Within its vast territory, China has to deal with multiple ethnic minorities. Although 92% of the total population belongs to the majority Han ethnic group – whose homogeneity goes often, and wrongly, unquestioned – these minorities, which occupy a great part of the territory and are especially concentrated in the borderlands, have been of great concern for Beijing since 1949. Fearing a fragmentation of China along ethnic and political lines – in a Chinese version of the domino theory – they had to find a national formula capable of including all these different populations within one Chinese nation and, thus, to persuade them to accept a single, all-embracing national identity. However, in the case of Xinjiang and Tibet, only recently integrated and where the vast majority of the population were non-Han, Beijing knew that special measures would be needed:

unassimilated groups with more powerful collective consciousness, and particularly those with stronger historical claims to independence, both common among groups incorporated violently and disadvantageously into empires, are most likely to resist states’ efforts to fold them into majority identities (Bovingdon 2002:277).

Although inspired by the Soviet model of nationalities, the PRC developed its own national formula. In fact, the discourse of the CCP about ethnic minorities changed dramatically after 1949. Before then, the right to self-determination was fully recognised,<sup>10</sup> and the official project was to make Tibet, Mongolia and Xinjiang “autonomous Republics attached to the Federation of China” (Jian 2007:133). After the victory, the CCP abandoned these notions, even admitting that this discourse had been adopted only in order to “win the minority nationalities to the side of [the] party” under the circumstances of the Civil War (1945-1949) and “united front” (Jian 2007:134). The new formula replaced the right to self-determination with limited regional autonomy.<sup>11</sup> In spite of the CCP rhetoric of the Chinese multicultural nation and multinational state, the

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<sup>10</sup> In 1932, the Chinese Communist Party “acknowledged the right of national self-determination of all minority nationalities” (Jian 2007:132).

<sup>11</sup> This is one of the major differences with the Soviet model of nationalities, which maintained the right of republics of the USSR to secede.

minorities policy was, in reality, aimed at producing a homogenous population through assimilation. “Although the party has always insisted that integration – that is, the achievement of a common proletarian culture – would be based on a blending of all nationalities’ characteristics, it is Han characteristics which are expected to be adopted by minorities” (Dreyer 1976:262).

In reality, the minorities policy in China rather emphasised the differences between the dominant Han ethnic group and the ethnic minorities. In fact, the Han nationality is a recent construct, a concept that emerged in the early twentieth century with the Republicans and the shift from the Chinese empire to the nation-state. Since then, Chinese leaders have been very much concerned about the lack of a sense of nationhood, partly because unity has been based on the clan or community level (Gladney 2003:x). As Dru C. Gladney argues:

In Benedict Anderson’s (1983:87) poignant terms, Sun [Yat-sen] was engaged in a project of ‘stretching the short tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire’. The ‘imagined’ Han majority nationality and derivative nationalities that were created (...) led to the invention and legitimization of the Han. (1994:99)

The recognition of ethnic minorities, while emphasising differences between Han and non-Han, also lessened the differences within the Han group itself, and thereby aided the construction of a unified Chinese nation by providing a clear and legitimate majority. Reciprocally, this minorities policy, designed to construct a unified nation, actually reinforced local ethnic identities, and can be seen as a relative failure. However, it is important to stress the various outcomes of this policy in terms of minorities’ integration in the Chinese nation. According to June T. Dreyer, some minorities have been more receptive to this policy than others, Tibet and Xinjiang being “the Party’s most conspicuous failures” (1976:270). Looking at the Mongol minority, Uradyn E. Bulag considers that, “contrary to the current dominant view that the Chinese regime is a builder of *minzu*<sup>12</sup>, in fact, it builds in order to destroy” (2004:85). According to him, the minorities policy was just a political expedient to assimilate them by undermining them as viable communities. However, in the case of Xinjiang, it seems that the outcome differed greatly: the Chinese regime has built the Uyghur *minzu* and has reinforced it.

Indeed, Gladney talks about the “Uyghur ethnogenesis”, and underlines the fact that the influence of the Chinese state on Uyghur identity has been crucial: “the vast majority of instances of ethnogenesis from undefined and loosely affiliated groups that later became fully fledged ethnic collectivities have occurred in the context of incorporation into and identity within a larger nation-state, often dominated by another ethnic group” (1990:6-7). Over the past two thousand years, with its population scattered among oases and tribal confederations, Uyghur identity has been marked by tribal, religious and political factionalism. Nevertheless, “in the face of higher order opposition” (Gladney 1991:81), Uyghur identity strengthened. Therefore, the ethnogenesis of the Uyghurs is a direct

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Minzu’ is the Chinese term to designate “nationality” or “ethnic group”.

outcome of their forced inclusion in the Chinese nation-state. Moreover, the formal recognition of ethnic minorities – naming them and defining them as a cohesive sub-state group<sup>13</sup> – and the system of autonomous regions – emphasising the fit between a territory and a specific population<sup>14</sup> – further highlighted their distinctiveness. As a result, the CCP minorities policy and the institution of minzu regional autonomy, instead of solidifying the Chinese nation-building in fact “inspire[d] the Uyghurs to think of Xinjiang as ‘their’ territory” (Bovingdon 2002:283).

### **The case of Xinjiang: “the Chinese nation denied”**

Xinjiang and Tibet – the two Chinese provinces where the minority proportion is greatest (Iredale and Guo 2003:10) – share the characteristic that the CCP minorities policy did not produce the expected outcome: instead of integrating local populations into the Chinese nation, it reinforced the sense of ethnic identity. Dreyer proposes several variables (1976:271) to explain this failure for both Uyghurs and Tibetans: their low degree of assimilation into Han Chinese society prior to 1949; the strong cohesiveness of their culture; the low degree of dispersion of their members amidst Han Chinese (although this has increased tremendously with Han immigration); the physical separation of their territory from Han China; and the existence of countervailing pressures from members of their ethnic group living outside the borders of China (for the Uyghurs, this is true to a lesser extent than for the Tibetans, and only since the late 1990s).

Therefore, both Xinjiang and Tibet are emblematic of the relative failure of Chinese nation-building. “The PRC, one of the strongest, most penetrative states in the world, has not, despite decades of trying, transformed all its citizens into conscious and willing members of the Chinese nation” (Bovingdon 2002:279). Thus, not only have the construction of the Chinese state and the domination of Xinjiang by the Chinese political centre fostered ethnic conflict and separatism, but also, the very process of nation-building has had such impacts. Indeed, as Bovingdon argues, “by ‘institutionalising multinationality’ (Brubaker 1996), they invested cultural distinctions with particular political significance. In the long term these [minorities] policies facilitated the political mobilisation of cultural differences” (Bovingdon 2002:278).

The long-term approach is important to understanding Uyghur separatism, which is the product of decades of Chinese rule. Uyghur identity was revealed in reaction to the CCP minorities policies, and has been gradually strengthened until cultural differences became grounds for independence claims. Therefore, the forced inclusion of Uyghurs in the Chinese nation produced long-term outcomes in terms of political claims and, consequently, human displacement. The political mobilisation of cultural differences in Xinjiang increased from the late 1980s, but its criminalisation by the Chinese government

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<sup>13</sup> The ethnonym “Uyghur” only reappeared in the 1930s, as a part of the nationality policy of the Guomindang, after having fallen into disuse for more than 500 years.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the system of autonomous regions, by attaching an ethnonym to a territory, draws a relation of property between this ethnic group and this territory. For example, the appellation of “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” defines this region as being the land of the Uyghur people.



since the 1990s has fostered increasing political refugee flows. Therefore, very much contested in Xinjiang, the process of nation-building in China contributed to the crystallisation of Uyghur identity and fuelled the ethnic conflict between Han and Uyghurs. Although it has not produced mass exodus, it definitely triggered forced migration in the form of a political refugee flow comprising Uyghur political activists, or those labelled by Beijing as “separatists”. As mentioned earlier, it is crucial to adopt a long-term approach to understanding contemporary forced migration from Xinjiang, as it is the outcome of decades of Chinese policies.

## **4 Rethinking the notion of displacement: human displacement as a result of political and social displacement**

State- and nation-building in China have been important factors in the formation and crystallisation of Uyghur identity, which, in turn, have increased ethnic tensions between Han and Uyghurs in Xinjiang. As a result, after the dead hand of repression during the 1960s-1970s (from the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution), political mobilisation of ethnic particularisms emerged and increased with the beginning of the Reform Era in the 1980s. However, the expression of Uyghur ethnic, cultural and religious identity, highlighting Uyghur outsidership vis-à-vis the Chinese nation, was seen by the Chinese government as a challenge. Once again, the threat of separatism haunted Chinese political leaders, who had to face up to the failure of their long-standing efforts to build and consolidate a homogenous Chinese nation. In this context, the 1990s saw a period of increasing political repression of – real or imagined – separatism, and extreme intolerance of any form of expression of Uyghur identity (especially if anchored in religion) in Xinjiang. Thus this period triggered the exile mostly of political activists, but also ordinary people. As this section shows, however, this third and contemporary wave of displacement from Xinjiang is not only the result of political persecution and state- and nation-building processes. It also results from a long-term historical process that has led to the marginalisation and growing frustration of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang.

This chapter aims to demonstrate that another kind of displacement has been and is still at work in Xinjiang. State- and nation-building did not only trigger human displacement; the CCP’s minorities policy and Han chauvinism also organised the displacement of the Uyghurs to the margins of Chinese society. Herein lies the paradox of China’s minorities policy: under the inclusive rhetoric of the one Chinese nation – a multicultural nation respectful of all its components – minorities often found themselves marginalised and excluded from the core of Chinese society. Social and political displacement, and, hence, growing inequalities between Han and Uyghurs in Xinjiang, made the latter feel like “strangers in their own land” (Bovingdon 2002). In this chapter, we will first demonstrate how the implementation of the minorities policy and its Xinjiang variation exerted more or less pressure against the expression of Uyghur identity. Then, we will show that



“heteronomy, or rule by the others” (Bovingdon 2004:120) and internal colonialism have been major tools for Beijing to ensure its control of this remote region, and also the main instrument of marginalisation of the Uyghurs. Finally, we will see how the Uyghur population has been excluded from their own society by political and social displacement.

### **Minorities policy in Xinjiang and Uyghur identity**

The minorities policy in Xinjiang, as in other minorities’ areas, has been subject to the vicissitudes of Chinese Communist rule, varying according to both political campaigns and relationships with neighbouring countries. However, we can distinguish four distinct phases: moderation (1949-1956), radicalism and forced assimilation (1956-1978), relaxation (1978-1989) and hardening and intolerance (from 1990 onwards). Repression of Uyghur identity has varied accordingly. However, contrary to what might be expected, the politicisation of cultural difference, and, thus, the expression of autonomy or independence claims, was most pronounced when repression of Uyghur identity was harshest.

In the first half of the 1950s, Beijing adopted a relatively tolerant and moderate policy in the region: Uyghurs would “remain in the transitional period [of the proletarian revolution] for a longer time” (Dreyer 1976:261). During this period, the institutions of Islamic worship and education remained untouched. From 1956, the whole minorities policy changed radically, especially in Xinjiang and Tibet. In both regions, the sequence was the same: the “Hundred Flowers Campaign” (1956-1957) triggered an unexpected wave of criticisms from local populations against the Han communist regime. Thereafter, the Party turned the nationwide “Anti-Rightist Campaign” (1957-1958) into an “antilocal nationalist rectification campaign”: “the previous toleration and respect for minority customs and habits and regards for the special conditions and peculiarities of Xinjiang was reversed” (McMillen 1979:117).

Further intolerance accompanied the Great Leap Forward (GLF), launched in 1958, whose specific aim in Xinjiang was to push the region towards both a socialist economy and rapid assimilation through cultural homogenisation. During these “bitter years of 1959-1962” (Benson and Svanberg 1998:104), economic hardship, repression against “nationality chauvinists” and growing intolerance of Islam triggered minority uprisings – as in Tibet in 1959 – and then a mass exodus in 1962 across the Sino-Soviet border. Consequently, the Chinese government adopted a “no-exit policy” and sealed this border in May 1962. The main objective was, in fact, political, and stemmed from deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations. By leaving China for the USSR, Uyghurs were “voting with their feet” and using flight as “an alternative to protest” (Zolberg et al. 1989:17), calling China a failure compared to its Soviet neighbour. Beijing’s “no-exit policy” was enforced for more than two decades and prevented further human displacement across the Sino-Soviet border from Xinjiang.

After the GLF, the pressure on Uyghur identity lessened for a short period, in order to counter Soviet propaganda and contain Uyghur resentment (McMillen 1979:124). However, as early as 1964, a new campaign against religion was launched, and several

mosques were closed down (McMillen 1979:126). The following year, the “Socialist Education Campaign” marked a return to a much more radical minorities policy, and prefigured a new period of dramatic intolerance, namely, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). During these years, a stepped-up campaign of forced assimilation into Han proletarian culture targeted minority areas (Bovingdon 2004:124). The “Destruction of the Four Olds”<sup>15</sup> by the Red Guards particularly targeted non-Han culture and religious affairs during this period. In Xinjiang as everywhere else, intellectuals, artists and religious followers, but also ordinary people articulating any cultural difference, were persecuted.

After the death of Mao in 1976 and the end of the Cultural Revolution, the minorities policy once again changed radically, and was relaxed under the influence of Hu Yaobang. However, this period of revitalisation and open expression of Uyghur culture and identity did not last long. Indeed, several conditions prompted the Chinese leadership into renewed action against Uyghurs: increasing political unrest in Tibet and the internationalisation of the Tibetan issue in 1987-1989 (Goldstein 2007:203); the multiplication of peaceful but potentially politicised demonstrations in Xinjiang (Castets 2004:23); and the events in Tiananmen Square and in the rest of China in spring 1989 (Castets 2004:25). It was in this context of mounting challenges to the Party State and amidst increasing international attention that the Chinese leaders moved to bring an end to this Uyghur cultural movement in Xinjiang. From the Baren insurrection in 1990 to the bus bombing in Urumqi in 1997, the relations between the Chinese authorities and the Uyghurs gradually deteriorated, leading to harsh repression of Uyghur identity (Castets 2004:28). Yet in spite of the very tense political climate under the “Strike Hard Campaign”, Uyghur political claims have only strengthened. From political activism and exile, to “everyday resistance” by ordinary people (Bovingdon 2004:144), defiance of Chinese rule in Xinjiang is more strident than ever. This social and political climate in Xinjiang results from two long-term and interconnected processes: internal colonialism since 1949, making Uyghurs feel like strangers in their own country; and political and social exclusion, especially since the Reform Era.

### **Heteronomy, internal colonialism and marginalisation**

In the early years of the PRC, the Chinese authorities were willing to maintain the appearance of autonomy in Xinjiang. In reality, however, Beijing adopted a “divide-and-rule” strategy by imposing what Bovingdon has referred to as “heteronomy” upon the Uyghurs, with the aim of rendering it more difficult for the latter to claim that Xinjiang was their own land. Though Uyghurs are the overwhelming majority ethnic group in Xinjiang, they did not receive the entire territory when the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous

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<sup>15</sup> “Destruction of the Four Olds” was initiated at the very beginning of the Cultural Revolution in China, in August 1966. The aim was to get rid of the backward components of the Chinese society which impeded the achievement of the socialist revolution. The “Four Olds” designated: old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. It particularly targeted religious buildings, such as temples and mosques, but also led to the destruction of precious and ancient elements of Chinese culture.

Region was established in 1955. Instead, they were “confronted with a condominium of nested autonomies”:

The Uyghurs occupied a patchwork of lands in the east and south, and they were divided and surrounded by lands assigned to the Mongols, Kazakhs, Hui, Kirghiz and others. (...) In parcelling out various ‘subautonomies’, the CCP simultaneously satisfied two goals: to reinforce the idea that Xinjiang belonged to thirteen different minzu and to counterbalance the overwhelming political and demographic weight of the Uyghurs. (Bovingdon 2004:118)

In establishing the system of regional autonomy, the CCP actually minimised the political influence of the Uyghurs by institutionalising twelve other minorities as “co-owners” of the land of Xinjiang. This scheme served to divide the people of Xinjiang along ethnic lines and also to isolate Uyghurs. According to Bovingdon, the system of regional autonomy in fact enacted “heteronomy, or rule by others” (2004:120).

Heteronomy was not just the product of this unfair power-sharing among minorities, but was also, and above all, the product of a long-standing Chinese strategy of internal colonialism, to ensure its sovereignty over remote areas. Since the eighteenth century and the rule of the Qing dynasty, colonisation through the sending of Han settlers into remote areas has been an important aspect of Han rule. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, state-sponsored immigration in Xinjiang increased in scale, and emerged as “one of the Party’s most effective tactics for ‘managing’ the Uyghurs” (Gladney 1998:4). The proportion of Han in Xinjiang increased from 6.7% in 1949 to 37.6% in 1990 (Iredale 2001:166). This massive influx of Han changed the demographic balance in Xinjiang dramatically, and enabled Beijing to build an effective colonial-like administrative apparatus there.

Here it is useful to recall Michael Hechter’s work, which was the first to theorise internal colonialism in the context of post-colonial Western urban societies – the British Isles. His analysis brings an illuminating theoretical background to understanding Beijing’s strategy in Xinjiang: in the internal colonial model, “the core is seen to dominate the periphery politically and to exploit it materially” (Hechter 1975:9). Two of the features of this model described by Hechter correspond particularly well with the situation in Xinjiang. First, Hechter notes that “the pattern of development in the periphery is dependent, and complementary to that in the core. Peripheral industrialisation, if it occurs at all, is highly specialised and geared for export.” (1975:9) In this context, the situation is often perceived by the local population to be exploitative. Indeed, according to David Bachman, “Xinjiang looks more and more like a centrally planned region with a ‘traditional’ colonial economy” (2004:169). That is, state investments concentrate on heavy industry and natural-resources development in majority Han areas, and a large number of industrial enterprises in Xinjiang are still controlled by the centre despite the economic liberalisation underway elsewhere in China. There is also evidence of huge disparities in the distribution of gross domestic product between Han and non-Han (Bachman 2004:165). As Bachman argues, Xinjiang has not benefited from the same economic measures as has the rest of the country since the Reform Era began. On the contrary,

Beijing's economic policies in Xinjiang "have reinforced a pattern of dominance by which the Han disproportionately benefit" (Bachman 2004:174). This "economic imperialism" (Bachman 2004:175) leads to what Andre Gunder Frank has referred to as a "development of underdevelopment" (Frank 1969, cited in Hechter 1975:31). As examined in the first section, situations where the core is perceived as exploitative and not as an agent of development for the periphery can encourage separatist sentiments.

The second feature of Hechter's model is the attempts of the core "to regulate the allocation of the social roles such that those roles commonly defined as having high prestige are reserved for its members" (Hechter 1975:9). A "cultural division of labour" emerges not only at the individual level in Xinjiang, between Han and non-Han, but also at the national level, between Xinjiang's economy and the rest of China. As a result, decisive authority at all levels has remained in the hands of trusted Han, as in a classic colonial administration. This economic and social dualism along ethnic lines reinforces ethnic identification in the two groups. As Hechter shows, when the "social stratification in the periphery is based on observable cultural differences", it helps the disadvantaged group to "conceive of itself as a separate 'nation' and seek independence" (1975:10).

### **Social and political displacement in Xinjiang**

Hechter's model of internal colonialism helps us to better understand the long-term process at work in Xinjiang, which, by forcing the social and political displacement of the Uyghurs to the margins of society, has both fostered ethnic identification, and channelled frustration and resentment towards claims to separatism and political exile. Indeed, the ongoing occurrence of human displacement, dating back to the early 1990s, is the result of both the increasing cultural intolerance in Xinjiang, and the gradual economic, social and political marginalisation of the local population, institutionalised by the colonialist-like state apparatus set up over the decades. In spite of Beijing's inclusive discourse about the multiethnic Chinese nation and the proclaimed equality of all nationalities, Beijing minorities policy in Xinjiang has proven to be very exclusive of Uyghurs.

Politically, Uyghur representatives do exist (Uyghurs accounted for 37.37% of the Xinjiang CCP and 48.83% of local and regional cadres in 1997), but their role is often reduced to a walk-on part, and they are excluded from the decision-making circles (Mackerras 2003:43). Indeed, "the key departments and organs of Xinjiang administration (...) [have] largely remained in the hands of Han CCP members" (McMillen 1979:48). Uyghur cadres with equal levels of competence to Han cadres are often appointed to the lowest levels of responsibility in the Party-State administration, as they are not trusted by Han. According to official available data, Uyghurs are under-represented but are still present in the political arena. However Bovingdon has shown that their low decision-making power results from the fact that they are "seriously under-represented at the middle levels" (2004:130). He draws two conclusions from this situation. First, this gap renders the circulation of political messages from the grassroots to the top more difficult and, thus, impedes the consideration of Uyghur political claims. Second, the lack of a talent pool of middle-level leaders does not guarantee a selection of Uyghur top leaders based on merit and experience but rather on their tractability and

loyalty to Beijing. As a result, these few Uyghurs in the regional government are co-opted by Beijing after careful selection, training and promotion. They are not the real decision-makers, but rather political tools for Beijing to blunt “the criticism that Han alone rule the region” (Bovingdon 2004:129).

However, their marginalisation is not only political, but also social and economic. The socio-economic repercussions of Han colonisation include widening inequalities between Han and Uyghurs, and an uneven sharing of resources and wealth. The arrival of Han settlers has increased the competition for arable lands and natural resources – especially water. In the industrial field, the overwhelming majority of enterprises are state-owned, Han-run, and located in Han areas. These same zones of colonisation are given priority for productive state investments, even though they already enjoy the highest rate of GDP and per capita income (Bachman 2004). As a result, local populations often feel that they do not benefit fairly from state-led development in Xinjiang. Hence, state investment is not perceived as an indication of Beijing’s benign efforts to bring development, modernity and better living conditions to the local population – as is claimed in official discourse – but rather as one aspect of a wider exploitative dynamic. In addition, Uyghurs are also confronted with discrimination in the labour market due to both persistent Han chauvinism and also unequal access to education. Indeed, Uyghurs have still fewer chances of higher education than Han in Xinjiang and are also confronted with linguistic difficulties as high responsibility occupations often require a good command of Mandarin. As Castets argues, “ethnic minorities in Xinjiang are still over-represented in the lowest levels of the socio-professional ladder and the Han over-represented in the highest levels” (2004:22). In 1990, for example, although minorities in Xinjiang represented around 54% of the population, they represented 76% of farm workers, less than 41% of professionals and less than 30% of directors and administrators (Castets 2004:22).

Socially, economically and politically marginalised, Uyghurs experience discrimination in every aspect of their lives, and feel like second-class citizens (Bovingdon 2004:146). Contrary to the official discourse, such feelings resonate with what has been noted in a different context of internal displacement – like “not being fully at home as (...) national citizen[s]” (Hedman 2008:5). As noted by Bovingdon, however:

political disenfranchisement and economic exploitation are only two of the causes of popular unrest. Cultural pressures, status hierarchies and ingrained prejudice have proven just as powerful as forms of oppression in motivating activism (Bovingdon 2004:121).

Indeed, since the “war on terror” waged by Beijing in Xinjiang in the early 2000s, Uyghur culture and religion has gone down the same process of marginalisation and criminalisation, fostering further resentment on the Uyghur side. Therefore, as shown throughout this chapter, human displacement from the 1990s is not only the result of the forced inclusion of Xinjiang and its population within the Chinese nation-state, but is also the result of a long-term process of marginalisation, of political and social displacement to the margins of the Chinese society. In this case, “displacement points to failures of

emplacement in nation and state, or, put differently, to problems of national (be)longing and state (dis)order” (Hedman 2008:5). Therefore, Xinjiang is emblematic of the failure of the Chinese state- and nation-building processes to integrate borderland peoples, to “emplace” them in the nation-state and give them a sense of belonging.

However, this statement needs to be qualified as the relations between Uyghur society and the Chinese state are more complex. Indeed, as argued by Bovingdon, the Chinese nation-building strategy in Xinjiang cannot be seen as a complete failure as the CCP “has managed to frame the terms of debate, set limits on acceptable levels and forms of resistance, and defined the conceivable outcomes” (2002:285). The Chinese government did not merely opt for the use of force but rather combined it with a strategy of cooptation: “while punishing the splittists, it has attempted to win the loyalties or at least the obedience of most Uyghurs with lures of education, jobs, and resources” (Bovingdon 2002:286). Indeed, Uyghur responses to Beijing’s policies do not only take the form of confrontation and oppositionality and many Uyghurs choose cooperation over resistance, mainly in order to reach a decent standard of living. However, although not all Uyghurs support secession – many of them only aspiring to wider cultural autonomy – “few [of them] speak against separatist violence because it remains the only mode of political praxis (...). For this reason, separatists have gained the silent support of many Uyghurs” (Yom 2001:3).

## 5 The Uyghur diaspora, developments and challenges

Human displacement from Xinjiang since the 1990s is the product of complex and overlapping processes which have, in turn, prompted the progressive constitution of a Uyghur diaspora. Although the Chinese government sought to prevent exile by closing the borders for several decades, the ineluctable and necessary opening-up of the country in the Reform Era (1980s) rendered border-crossing and exile more accessible for Uyghurs. As argued in the introductory chapter, this most recent wave of human displacement is characterised by a higher level of politicisation than ever before. If the making of a nation-state impacts on human displacement, it also shapes the forms and claims of the community in exile. As Fiona Adamson argues, “episodes of transnationalized contention originating in diaspora communities are often articulated as responses or counterclaims arising from past or ongoing instances of displacement, repression, or marginalisation” (2004:48).

Therefore, this chapter will seek to demonstrate that the formation of the Uyghur diaspora and its recent developments (homogenisation, politicisation, unification, publicisation) are very much a response to Chinese policy in Xinjiang since the 1990s. First, we will explain why, over several decades, the Uyghur community in exile has been unable to reach the same level of political mobilisation as has the Tibetan diaspora, in



spite of the numerous similarities between the fates of these two peoples. Then we will show how the radical changes in Beijing's policy in Xinjiang in the 1990s transformed the Uyghurs into a target minority and, thereby, fostered growing political mobilisation. Finally, we will demonstrate that, in the last decade, the Uyghur diaspora has initiated a process of far-reaching transformation in order to gain international visibility.

### **Debut: a fragmented and scattered diaspora**

What is striking about the Uyghur situation is that, despite its tremendous similarity with the Tibetan situation, it is almost unknown, and very little discussed, in Western countries. While Tibet, the Dalai Lama and the wider political grievances of Tibetans against the Chinese government have gained a great measure of publicity in international media, few people have even heard the name Xinjiang. Yet these two remote regions have a lot in common. First, both were incorporated into the Chinese Empire in the eighteenth century under the Qing dynasty. Second, they both remained far beyond the reach of Beijing, and were merely notional protectorates until 1949. Third, both underwent a so-called "peaceful liberation" in 1949-1950, after which they were ruled by the CCP and forcibly integrated into the Chinese nation-state as "autonomous regions". Fourth, both their societies were culturally and religiously homogenous and had their own specific political and social organisation before the Chinese invasion. Fifth, both their peoples experienced the hardship of forcible integration into the Chinese nation, including acculturation, massive Han immigration, dilution of the local culture, violent political campaigns, and religious, political and cultural repression. Sixth, and finally, both their communities saw much forced migration as a result of persecution. Despite these notable similarities, however, "Tibet [is] in the limelight [while] Xinjiang [is] in the dark" (Jackson 2005).

How are we to explain this striking difference? William K. Jackson proposes a set of explanations. Firstly, Jackson considers that Xinjiang, more than Tibet, is a victim of false historical assumptions, largely conveyed through official Chinese historiography and "generally unquestioned by the West until recent times" (2005:126). For example, Xinjiang is seen as an integral part of China through the very name of this territory, which was given by the Qing dynasty to the area previously known as Eastern Turkestan.

Secondly, while the number of Han Chinese remained very small in Tibet until 1949 ("countable using one hand"), they already constituted 6.7% of Xinjiang's population in 1949. In this regard, the speed of Han population transfer from China to these two regions also differed considerably. In Xinjiang, the Han population increased from 6.7% in 1949 to 37.6% in 1990 (Iredale 2001:166); whereas in Tibet Han population only amounted to 3.7% of the population in 1990 (Iredale 2001:138)<sup>16</sup>. It appears that Beijing followed a much more colonialist policy in Xinjiang than in Tibet, partly because the

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<sup>16</sup> According to the Chinese population census, in 2000 Tibetans in Tibet amounted to 95.08% of the population, while Han constituted 4.06%. Indeed, the 1990s and the "Go West" policy encouraged Han immigration, especially in Lhasa. Data available at: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/null/163485.htm>

incorporation of Tibet into the PRC was considered much more controversial than Xinjiang.

Indeed – and this is the third major difference – political organisation in Xinjiang and Tibet before the Chinese invasion was quite different. While Xinjiang was fragmented along tribal and political lines, Tibetans were unified under the leadership of the Dalai Lama. Therefore, in Mao’s own words, Xinjiang was considered “less of a problem than Tibet as there were no religious leaders or government in exile comparable to the Dalai Lama with his base in Dharamsala and there was no independence movement with overseas support” (Jackson 2005:127). In the absence of strong leadership, the Uyghurs lacked organisational unity or international representation. Moreover, the lack of a political and spiritual leader in Xinjiang to “sort out disputes” also favoured local factionalism and widespread violence (Gladney 1998:7).

A fourth difference to note stems from Tibet’s comparatively greater ethnic homogeneity relative to Xinjiang, which, situated at a crossroads between civilisations, has been a “melting pot of peoples” (Jackson 2005:129). As a result, Tibetans have shared a common sense of identity for a much longer period, whereas, as we have seen previously, the ethnogenesis of Uyghurs is much more recent. Fifthly, the respective religions of Tibet and Xinjiang enjoy a very different image in the eyes of the international community. As noted by Jackson, “especially in the West, Islam tends to be associated with extremist violence and radical hate-speech,” while, by contrast, “Tibetan Buddhism and the pacifist worldview it seems to convey has played a major role in its gaining Western adherents” (Jackson 2005:131). Finally, Tibetan information networks, helped by a very active diaspora worldwide, have been much more efficient in publicising the situation in Tibet. By contrast, the efforts of the Uyghur diaspora to get their case onto the international agenda have had little success – partly because of lack of unity and leadership.

Indeed, the Uyghur diaspora has long suffered from fragmentation and lack of coordination. Until the 1990s and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uyghur communities in exile were divided along an East-West fracture, between the Western anti-communist diaspora stemming from the first wave of displacement and the Central-Asian diaspora who had found refuge in the Soviet Union during the second wave. These two groups lived separate existences until quite recently, and communication between them – and also with the homeland – was almost nonexistent, being rendered difficult in any case by the difference in alphabets (Besson 1998:5). Moreover, while the Central-Asian diaspora was relatively homogeneous and the Uyghur communities of the different Soviet republics were close-knit, the scattered Western Uyghur community suffered from this geographic discontinuity. Even after the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the deep ideological fracture between the two branches of the Uyghur diaspora, the lack of coordination and leadership and the absence of an umbrella organisation to gather the multitude of militant organisations abroad seriously hindered their capacity for action, their visibility on the international scene, and their coherence. As a result, the Uyghur community in exile remained much weaker than the Tibetan diaspora until the late 1990s.



### **The change in the 1990s**

A gradual reorganisation of the Uyghur diaspora was initiated in the 1990s, and shaped in no small measure by the hardening of Beijing's policy in Xinjiang. Human displacement since the early 1990s has been driven in large part by the political and religious repression that followed the phase of tolerance in the 1980s, and which has intensified after 1997 with the launch of the "Strike Hard Campaign". In fact, the outcomes of Beijing's crackdown on Xinjiang were the opposite of what was expected by the Chinese government. That is, instead of undermining Uyghur opposition in Xinjiang, it fostered new forms of everyday resistance (Scott 1990), border-crossing and political activism abroad. In that way, involuntarily, government policies shaped the forms of today's Uyghur diaspora.

This is especially salient as regards Beijing's policy on religion in Xinjiang, which has undergone several shifts. During the 1980s, Uyghurs enjoyed a relative liberalisation in terms of official regulation of religious practices (Waite 2006:254). However, after the Baren incident in 1990, restrictions on religion were increased markedly throughout the decade. As argued by Mackerras, "Islam and ethnic identity are very closely linked" in Xinjiang and Uyghurs perceive attacks against their religious identity as attacks on their very existence as an ethnic group. Joanne S. Finley goes even further, arguing that there is a discernible relationship between perceived Muslim oppression and Islamic renewal in Xinjiang. According to this argument, in the crackdown on religion from 1997, Islam became the "vehicle for symbolic opposition to Muslim oppression, at the national level (with the Chinese polity viewed as a coloniser) and the global level (with individuals expressing empathy with similarly 'oppressed' Muslims in the Middle East)" (2007:640).

Islamic renewal, as well as religious repression, played an important role in the strengthening of Uyghur ethnic identity and, by extension, in separatism and exile. Mackerras argues that, "when the Chinese tread on Islam, the Uyghurs are full of resentment, but (...) Islam, when allowed to flourish, makes them content with the government but also separate and alienated from Chinese society" (2001:297). In his view, "the Chinese authorities are thus put in a no win situation over religion" (Mackerras 2001:297). However, religious repression is merely the catalyst for Uyghur resentment against the Chinese government, and Islam is only one of the several unifying markers of Uyghur identity. As argued in the second section, the Uyghur ethnogenesis is the product of a long-term interaction with the Chinese nation-state, "in dialectical fashion" (Gladney 1990:21), and is still at work.

The 1990s also saw radical changes in Beijing's discourse on Xinjiang. For decades, the Chinese government had sought to maintain a façade of harmony, trying to silence social and political unrest and inter-ethnic tensions in Xinjiang. However, this approach to "the Xinjiang problem" changed dramatically in 1996, when the authorities started conducting political campaigns against "illegal religious activities", "separatism" or "terrorist forces" (Becquelin 2004:3). Suddenly, the CCP's traditional rhetoric of harmonious multiethnic China was abandoned in favour of talk of traitors and internal enemies – the so-called "splittists". The publicisation of Uyghur separatism further intensified after 9/11, when

Beijing launched an international publicity campaign about violent and (so-called) terrorist acts in Xinjiang. One of its objectives was to restore China's image in the eyes of the international community and to justify the ongoing political and religious crackdown in Xinjiang, since Western human rights organisations had time and again condemned China for human rights abuses in the region<sup>17</sup>. Gladney has proposed an alternative explanation for this sudden change in Chinese government discourse, which has more to do with domestic politics. By promoting "Chinese nationalism as a 'unifying ideology'" and "highlighting separatist threats and external intervention, China can divert attention away from its own domestic instabilities" (1999:14).

The major consequence for the Uyghur population in Xinjiang of this shift in Beijing was that they became a "target minority", persecuted because of their ethnic and religious identity. Any of their actions deemed by Beijing to be "unpatriotic" is automatically interpreted as an attempt to split the country (Gladney 1998:9). Indeed, Zolberg et al.'s definition of "target minorities" seems a good model for understanding the current situation of Uyghurs in Xinjiang:

Efforts by the rulers to achieve national unity [involve] the construction of a cultural formula (...) that [groups] minorities with a majority of the population into a collective identity. (...) Efforts by the state to transform the deviants into subjects or citizens in the approved mold [give] rise to the classic type of refugee, targeted for persecution for reasons of religion or nationality. (Zolberg et al. 1989:238)

Therefore, any expression of Uyghur ethnic identity, and thus of outsidership to the Chinese nation and its cultural formula, is criminalised. Under the broader rubric of the "war against terrorism", Beijing has tightened its control over everyday Uyghur life, and launched numerous campaigns to "rectify social order" (Becquelin 2004:1). Such campaigns have "led to widespread arbitrary arrests, closure of places of worship, crackdowns on traditional religious activities, prohibition of personal religious practices in state-controlled institutions (such as administrative offices, schools, and enterprises), and the sentencing of thousands of people to harsh prison terms or death after grossly unfair and often summary judicial processes" (Becquelin 2004:1).

As reported by Human Rights Watch, the extension of the "anti-separatist" clause to "all citizens who profess a religion" has rendered religious practice highly risky, since the interpretation of "illegal religious activities" (as equivalent to splittism) has become highly subjective (2005:37). As a result, both political activists and ordinary people are arbitrarily arrested and detained in prison or re-education camps (Amnesty International 1999). The extreme intolerance of Beijing since the 1990s has impacted on the nature of human displacement – refugees from Xinjiang are more politicised because they are fleeing persecution – and, thus, has contributed to the politicisation of the Uyghur diaspora. However, the publicisation of separatism initiated by the Chinese government has

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<sup>17</sup> For further details about human rights abuses in Xinjiang, consult Amnesty International (1997, 1999, 2004, 2007) and Human Rights Watch (2005) reports cited in the bibliography.

actually served the Uyghurs' ends: by highlighting separatist acts in Xinjiang, Beijing has also provided official recognition of what is happening there. Whereas the media blackout had ensured that the Uyghurs' situation was completely ignored, publicity now gives a certain legitimacy to the Uyghur diaspora.

### **The transformation of the Uyghur diaspora: toward the Tibetan model?**

Observations on the role of diasporas in transnationalised contention often begin with the assumption that there is “an already politicised and reified diaspora” (Adamson 2004:48). However, as Adamson argues, “the emergence of mobilized and politicized diaspora networks – or even the existence of a collective identification with a particular diaspora – is dependent on processes of political mobilization carried out by political entrepreneurs” (2004:48). In the case of the Uyghur diaspora, which was scattered and fragmented along political lines for decades, political mobilisation first required a process of homogenisation. As seen already, this process was fostered by international factors, such as the end of the Cold War, the renewed circulation of persons and ideas between the Western and the Central-Asian communities, and the subsequent disappearance of the ideological fracture between them. The most recent wave of political refugees also contributed to homogenisation, as it wove links between the different communities. At the same time, homogenisation was also the result of a political will from the Uyghur diaspora, notably after the shock of the very severe repression of the Gulja riots in 1997. Finally, the technological advances in transport and communication – especially the Internet – have also played a major role: “cyberspace has linked the small Uighur communities throughout the world and allowed them to overcome geographic borders and political censorship” (Petersen 2006:65).

The political mobilisation of the Uyghur diaspora since the early 1990s has been partly a reaction to the hardening of Beijing's policy in Xinjiang. However,

the mobilization of diaspora networks by political entrepreneurs (...) depends on their ability to produce categories, identifications, and ideologies that link memories, perceptions, or lived experiences of forced dislocation, displacement, marginalisation, or repression with strategies of political action that are designed to mount a challenge to the political status quo (Adamson 2004: 48-49).

In this regard, Uyghur political refugees of the 1990s have played a major role in providing such categories and in creating a collective consciousness among Uyghurs in exile. Progressively, the myriad of Uyghur organisations abroad – originally cultural or religious – have become political movements, willing not merely to deal with the Uyghur community of their country of residence, but also to act directly on the international scene on behalf of the Uyghur people (Besson 1998:8).

Over the last decade, the Uyghur diaspora has sought to develop new means and to engage in new ways to gain greater visibility and legitimacy in the international arena. Aware of its weaknesses, the Uyghur community in exile seems to have followed the Tibetan model that has proved to be so successful in attracting international attention and support. First, Uyghur exiles have sought to multiply and connect those information

networks, such as publications, broadcasting, or websites, which emerged throughout the 1990s. Similarly, they have initiated a coordination and unification of the different organisations worldwide, such as through the World Uyghur Youth Union in 1996 (Castets 2004:34). Nonetheless, the Uyghur diaspora always knew perfectly well that its major weakness was its lack of leadership – and that leadership was the main strength of the Tibetans, unified behind the personality of the Dalai Lama and represented by the government in exile (Goldstein 2004). In 2004, a new umbrella organisation called the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) was formed in Munich to represent the Uyghur community in exile.

Another imperative was the designation of a leader to embody the Uyghur cause on the international scene. After the death in 1995 of the charismatic and uncontested leader Isa Yusuf Alptekin – a former nationalist leader who left Xinjiang in 1949 – an uneasy succession process ensued. Since the early 2000s, however, Rebiya Kadeer has emerged as an increasingly prominent Uyghur political figure among the diaspora (James 2006). She was elected to the presidency of the WUC in 2006, and has also been designated as the “spiritual mother of the Uyghur people”<sup>18</sup>, and is thus well positioned to become the next Uyghur political leader.

However, one of the difficulties remains legitimacy: legitimacy of the leader, but also legitimacy of the political institutions in exile, which is not yet established. For instance, a few months after the creation of the WUC, another umbrella organisation emerged in Washington: the Republic of East Turkestan Government in Exile. “Since then, the Eastern Turkestan nationalist movement has been ‘walking on two legs’, and perhaps more – since not all Uyghur associations throughout the world joined either of these new organisations” (Shichor 2007b:1). Finally, as part of their transformation, Uyghurs in exile have tried to pursue a strategy of alliance with the Tibetans. As early as 1981, meetings occurred between the Dalai Lama and Uyghur political leaders<sup>19</sup>. “Uyghurs have begun to work closely with Tibetans internationally to put political pressure on China in international fora” (Gladney 1999:19).

Therefore, the Uyghur diaspora is gradually developing new channels and networks to act on the international scene and to pursue activities of representation and lobbying. However, the Uyghur plight remains largely unknown in Western countries and Xinjiang is still far from securing the level of attention that Tibet has attracted. Moreover, the Uyghur diaspora faces the same challenge as the Tibetans: namely, that their struggle may be restricted to the field of human rights, while their claims for self-determination are left aside. Nonetheless, the Uyghur diaspora is getting more and more active, and continues to challenge Chinese sovereignty over Xinjiang.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.uyghurcongress.org/En/AboutWUC.asp?mid=1095738888>

<sup>19</sup> Another anecdotal sign of the rapprochement between Tibetan and Uyghur communities is the contribution of the Dalai Lama to the very recent book of Rebiya Kadeer about her struggle against Chinese oppression (Kadeer 2009).

## Conclusion

Starting from the observation of a change in the dynamics of human displacement in Xinjiang since the 1990s, our aim was to identify and understand the impacts of Chinese state- and nation-building on human displacement in Xinjiang and their long-lasting relationship. As seen throughout this study, human displacement in Xinjiang is the result of complex, overlapping and long-term processes.

First, referring to Zolberg's work, we have shown that ethnic conflict and separatism in Xinjiang – a pattern of social conflict likely to generate refugee flows – are the result of the emergence of the PRC as a new state in 1949. The subsequent forced incorporation of borderlands, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, into the Chinese state has created minorities, or “populations in between,” caught into the Chinese nation without belonging to it. However, ethnic conflict and separatism in Xinjiang are the consequence not merely of its physical inclusion in the PRC but are also of the policy of nation-building in China. As argued in the second chapter, although Chinese authorities have built a minorities policy aimed at assimilating ethnic minorities and consolidating the Chinese nation, in Xinjiang, this policy has, in fact, strengthened Uyghur identity and sense of distinctiveness until cultural differences became grounds for independence claims.

However, the ongoing occurrence of human displacement, dating back to the early 1990s, also results from a long-term process of political and social displacement of the Uyghur population at the margins of the Chinese society. The imposition of heteronomy, internal colonialism and Han chauvinism in Xinjiang, has led to the marginalisation of the Uyghurs, thus fostering further ethnic identification and channelling frustration and resentment towards separatism and political exile. Finally, we have shown that, state- and nation-building in the PRC not only triggered human displacement but also shaped the forms of the community in exile. Indeed, minorities in exile and states of origin are linked in a long-term and long-distance relationship which does not stop at the frontiers of the state. If the Uyghur community in exile has emerged in reaction to the process of the Chinese nation-state building, it is still shaped by Beijing's policy in Xinjiang, whose hardening has triggered recent major transformations of the Uyghur diaspora such as homogenisation, unification, and publicisation. In turn, the Uyghur diaspora plays an important political role as, through advocacy activities on the international stage, it is more and more openly contesting Chinese sovereignty over Xinjiang.

However, the challenges that the Uyghur diaspora has to take up are sizeable. First of all, its organisation is still fragile and its lack of unity and legitimacy is worsened by the absence of an uncontested leader. The Uyghur diaspora is definitely evolving towards the Tibetan model. Nevertheless, this does not guarantee any success in its struggle for Xinjiang's independence as the internationalisation of the Tibetan issue since the late 1980s and the mobilisation of Western human rights associations have not changed the fate of Tibetans in Tibet. However, in the case of Xinjiang, Muslim solidarity could play an important role if Muslim states allied to put pressure on China collectively.

Nevertheless, China has proven quite indifferent to international criticism; and independence of Xinjiang – or any other secessionist region – is very unlikely as the Chinese government fears that “the separation of one region might trigger the loss of all” (Bovingdon 2004:289), that is national disintegration.

## Afterword

This paper was written a few weeks before the violent events of July 2009 in Xinjiang. As a result, these events are not mentioned nor taken into account in this study. However, because of their importance, notably because they represent a big turn in Uyghurs' attitude towards Beijing, it might be useful to add here a few words about what happened in early July and its connection to the subject of this paper.

On 5 July 2009, violent riots broke out in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Province. It is said that a peaceful demonstration against the killing of two Uyghur by Han co-workers in a Guangdong toy factory (Watts 2009a) turned into an angry mob after the security forces intervened. The demonstration would have degenerated when Uyghur demonstrators started to set upon Han by-passers, stabbing them or beating them to death. The day after, looking for revenge, hundreds of Han residents took to the streets and attacked Uyghurs. Numbers about dead and injured people are still controversial and greatly vary according to the sources. For example, Uyghur diaspora associations consider that the number of Uyghur victims is largely under-estimated by the Chinese authorities in order to designate the Uyghur as the culprits. The official numbers say that “184 people were killed, including 137 Han Chinese, 46 Uighurs and one from the Hui ethnic group, and more than 1,000 injured” (Watts 2009a), mostly Han. This event is presented as the worst episode of inter-ethnic violence or the “deadliest ethnic clashes” (Watts 2009b) in decades. After years of political crackdown in Xinjiang, these events are significant and several conclusions can be drawn.

First, this event reveals the importance of inter-ethnic tensions in the XUAR and the deep distrust between the Han and the Uyghurs. In this way, this episode is one more indicator of the failure of the Chinese government's strategy of integration of Uyghurs in the Chinese nation. After the uprising in Tibet in March 2008, this inter-ethnic conflict shows that, although the margins of the Chinese empire have physically been integrated, borderlands people still contest their inclusion in the Chinese nation, thus challenging the Chinese nation-state. Moreover, in spite of Beijing's harsh repression against the expression of Uyghur identity since the mid 1990s, Uyghur sense of outsidership is still very strong. It is very likely that Beijing's policy towards the expression of Uyghur identity and culture will harden in consequence of the Urumqi riots.



Second, although the Chinese government used force to quell the riots in Xinjiang, one can observe a clear change in the way Beijing handled the situation, compared to the uprising in Tibet in March 2008. Indeed, when the riots broke out, Beijing quickly reacted by sending massive security forces to the Xinjiang capital: "thousands of riot officers and armed paramilitary police were keeping tight control of southern Urumqi" (Branigan 2009b). These events led to the arrest of hundreds of people, mainly Uyghurs, deemed to be responsible for the death of Han people and the destruction of Han properties. According to the state news agency, Xinhua, authorities in western China have arrested 1,667 people "suspected of being involved in the violence in Urumqi" (McCurry 2009). Although there are no details of the ethnicity of suspects, it is said that the majority of them are Uyghurs. However, these official numbers are contested by Rebiya Kadeer who "claimed that almost 10,000 Uighurs had 'disappeared' during ethnic unrest" in Xinjiang and "called on the international community to launch an inquiry" (McCurry 2009).

The Uyghur diaspora immediately reacted to these events, showing their support for the Uyghur people. According to the World Uyghur Congress "the Chinese authorities ha[ve] turned the peaceful demonstration in Urumqi into a bloodbath to justify a crackdown on Uighurs". Rebiya Kadeer considers that Chinese authorities are responsible for violence in Urumqi in one way or another: "for Uighurs, taking part in a demonstration is akin to committing suicide, so they would not have demonstrated without a good reason" (McCurry 2009). Indeed, the killing of two Uyghur workers in Guangdong was just the catalyst of an underlying and growing tension between Han and Uyghurs, fuelled by socio-economic inequalities, repression of Uyghur cultural and religious identity and the feeling of being "strangers in their own land".

As for the Chinese authorities, the analysis of these events is radically different. Once again, alleged separatism is seen as the unique and ongoing cause of tensions in Xinjiang, the main instigators of unrest in Xinjiang being Uyghurs in exile, accused of fomenting the riots from abroad. According to Xinhua, "the unrest was masterminded by the World Uyghur Congress – led by Rebiya Kadeer" (Branigan 2009b). In this way, Chinese authorities resorted to the same strategy as during the uprising in Tibet in March 2008, when exiled Tibetans and the Dalai Lama were also blamed for fomenting the unrest in Lhasa while Tibetans accused the government of a brutal crackdown (Branigan 2009b).

The major change in how Beijing handled ethnic violence in Xinjiang is that Chinese authorities have applied "new strategies to control flow of information" (Wines 2009). In appearance, they have played the game of transparency and have given much more access to foreign reporters. Whereas foreign journalists were banned from Tibet, then and now, and information was closely filtered by the government, Xinjiang remained open and "officials (...) organised press conference and trips" for journalists (Watts 2009b). Of course, internally, information about the riots and national media have been tightly controlled. "China's central government took all the usual steps to enshrine its version of events as received wisdom: it crippled Internet service, blocked Twitter's micro-blogs, [Youtube and cellphone calls in the region], purged search engines of unapproved references to the violence, [and] saturated the Chinese media with the state-sanctioned

story" (Wines 2009). This internal communication strategy greatly differs from the government's approach to the outside world. "It reflects lessons learned from the military crackdown in Tibet 17 months ago" (Wines 2009) when the locking down of Tibet was widely condemned overseas.

Third, these events are not without consequences for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang as well as for the diaspora. There are two major consequences: one – negative – is the hardening of Beijing's policies in Xinjiang and further repression of Uyghur identity, the other – more positive – is the publicisation of the Uyghur plight and the international community's increasing awareness of the situation in Xinjiang.

Indeed, in the aftermath of the Urumqi riots, Beijing has launched a new "Strike Hard" campaign in Xinjiang. The *People's Daily* newspaper announced that: "from the start of November, public security bodies in Xinjiang will start a thorough 'strike hard and punish' campaign to further consolidate the fruits of maintaining stability and eliminate security dangers" (Branigan 2009a). According to Nicholas Bequelin, in reality - and as for all the "Strike Hard" campaigns launched in the past – "the result of these campaigns is to shorten judicial proceedings. The threshold for arrests and convictions is lowered and the number of cases where people are sentenced collectively generally goes up" (Branigan 2009a). Since July 2009, 22 people have been sentenced to death and at least nine of them have been executed. Most of them are Uyghurs (Philip 2010). In addition to this very repressive environment and the increased and very tight surveillance of the paramilitary police, Uyghurs have to face a situation of high isolation since the Internet and the international lines were shut down in July. However, at the end of December, Urumqi authorities revealed that the black-out on communication would be gradually lifted. In turn, Xinjiang Parliament has passed a law guaranteeing the "ethnic unity" of the province, which, in reality, is a way to legally justify further repression against all those whose behaviour will be deemed as separatist (Philip 2010).

On the positive side, this episode of ethnic violence allowed Xinjiang to finally come out of the dark. Indeed, as we have seen in section 4, until recently, the Uyghur situation was almost unknown, as western media have always had less coverage of it than of the Tibetan.

However, the Urumqi riots were covered and commented on worldwide for several days and articles about the situation in Xinjiang are still regularly published in the western newspapers. Therefore, since July 2009, the international community's awareness of the Uyghur plight has undoubtedly increased and the Uyghur diaspora's campaign has been publicised as never before, which might help.



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