

The Uighurs of Xinjiang

Abd Al-Hada

Central Asia remains one of the most mysterious and complex areas of the world. This brief but fascinating report portrays one of the many unreached peoples who populate this region.

The Uighurs are largely a settled, village people who inhabit the network of oases in the arid Tarim Basin of Xinjiang in China's far northwest. Their ancestors, however, were a nomadic people who once ruled Central Asia, built its first walled cities and created its first literate civilization. The purpose of this paper is to give the reader a brief profile of the Uighur people today. Our prayer is that in ways beyond our imagination our Lord Jesus will utilize this profile in His purpose for the Uighur people to give them a future in Himself far more glorious than anything they have ever experienced in their rich history.

POPULATION AND GEOGRAPHY

The Uighur people (to pronounce, stress the "U") live primarily in the western part of China in Xinjiang (old spelling: Sinkiang) Province and the adjacent parts of the Soviet Union. The official population in 1982 was a total of 6,171,000 Uighurs: 5,957,000 in Xinjiang; 211,000 in the Soviet Union; and 3,000 in Afghanistan. A few have migrated to other areas, such as Turkey and West Germany. This report will focus primarily on the Uighurs of China, *who constitute one of the largest unreached people groups in the world.*

Xinjiang Province is an arid region of high mountains surrounding two vast, barren plains—the Jungar in the north

Abd Al-Hada is a pseudonym for someone preparing for ministry among the Uighurs. He has written this report under the auspices of the Institute of Chinese Studies (Pasadena, California).

Abd Al-Hada

The Uighurs of Xinjiang

and the Tarim in the south. It is the largest province in China, containing one-sixth of the land area of the country. However, it contains only 13 million people, which is only 1.3% of the total population.

The population of Xinjiang is primarily located in the oasis cities that ring each of the desert plains, which derive their water from the nearby mountains. Many also live in the pasturelands that surround the northern Jungar basin. The Uighurs in particular are agricultural oasis dwellers, cultivating grains, fruits and vegetables in irrigated fields. This is in contrast to the Kazakhs, who are primarily sheepherders, and the Han Chinese of this region, who tend to be office and industrial workers.

In addition to these three groups, the other nationalities in the province include Kirghiz, Uzbek, Tatar, Hui, Mongolian, Tadjik, and Russian. The Uighur make up about 45% of the province, but they are concentrated in the Tarim basin cities in the southern part of Xinjiang. In the northern Jungar basin, there are more Kazakhs and Chinese. Uighurs only make up 10% of the capital city of Urumqi in the Jungar basin, but since the city has almost one million people, that number is still substantial.

LANGUAGE

The Uighur language is a part of the Altaic language group, named after the Altai mountains of northeastern Xinjiang. This group is related to the Uralic languages, which include Finnish and Hungarian. The Altaic group has over 80 million speakers worldwide, and is divided into three families: the Turkic, the Mongolian and the Manchu-Tungus. Of these, the Turkic has the vast majority of speakers, over 75 million, and has been divided into four branches. The Uighur language, together with Uzbek, forms the Southeast branch of the Turkic family. Turkish itself is part of the Southwest Branch, and is the most widely spoken language in the Altaic group, with more than 45 million people.

Due to the fact that most of the Turkic peoples became Muslims between the eighth and eleventh centuries, the languages have been heavily influenced by Arabic. This can be seen most clearly in their form of writing. The earliest

known Uighur writing was in a runic script, probably of Semitic origin. This was replaced in the eighth through tenth centuries by a Manichaean script from Iran.

Since the 11th century the Uighurs, along with all other Turkic peoples, have been writing with a modified form of the Arabic script. The modifications are due to the presence of sounds in these languages that do not occur in Arabic, so new letters were added. The Arabic influence was partially reversed in this century.

In 1924 the new secular government of Turkey adopted the Latin characters for their language, replacing the Arabic. This change was voluntary, but other Turkic languages have been changed by force. Both the Russians and the Chinese have forced the Turkic peoples living under their control to change the Arabic script for Latin or Cyrillic scripts at one time or another, sometimes changing the same written language twice. In the case of Uighur, the Chinese changed it to the Latin script in 1957, and back to the Arabic in 1978 after the Cultural Revolution.

The Soviets changed their Uighur script to Latin in 1924, and then in the 1950's they imposed another change to Cyrillic, where it remains today. These changes were supposedly made on the scientific basis that the Arabic script is not well adapted to the Turkic language, since it stresses consonants, whereas the Turkic stresses the importance of vowels. At the time, they thought that this contributed to the high percentage of illiteracy.

But the changes also appeared to be for the purpose of isolating each group from their relatives across the border. This also functions to isolate them from other outside influences, such as Christianity. (This same effect was also gained when the Chinese simplified their own character system of writing after the Communist revolution. The new generation of Chinese cannot read any books or material from Taiwan or Hong Kong unless it is produced specifically for them.)

Thus the Christian world is faced with the task of producing the Scriptures in at least two, and maybe three, Uighur scripts—Arabic for the majority in China, Cyrillic for those in the Soviet Union, and possibly Latin for those in

The Bible must be produced in at least two, and maybe three, Uighur scripts.

Abd Al-Hada The Uighurs of Xinjiang

China who grew up under that regime and for those who immigrated to Turkey.

UIGHUR CULTURE

The culture as well as the language has been heavily influenced by Arab and Iranian Muslims. Like Arabs, Uighurs plant grapevines and fruit trees in front of their houses. For feasts they eat piles of rice pilaf topped with chunks of mutton dripping with fat, called "drafan" (identical to Jordanian "mansif"). Like Iran, the streets have vendors of mutton kebabs sitting by metal boxes of hot coals. Their bread, called "nan" (same as Farsi and Urdu), comes in round, flat loaves. The cities and the people give one the impression of being in the Middle East, not in China.

Also like other Muslim people groups, the Uighurs have their own brand of "folk Islam," with its emphasis on amulets, exorcisms, and protections against the "evil eye" and "jinn" (evil spirits). Fortune telling and animal sacrifices for illness are also a part of the culture, as are visits to the shrines of local Islamic saints, who are useful in making intercession to God. Since in Islam God is considered very transcendent and unknowable by man, many mediums and devices are invented to make God accessible. More study should be done on which aspects of folk Islam particularly apply to the Uighur culture.

There is much information available in English, and even more in Swedish, on traditional Uighur culture. Notwithstanding the fact that changes take place very slowly in Central Asia, it is unclear how much of this traditional culture is surviving the onslaught of modern civilization. One early observer noted that the Uighur boys who were sent to Turkey or the USSR for education in the early part of this century came back unwilling to follow old ways. How much more now, when virtually everyone is taught to read and has access to the wider world?

One indication of modern inroads into Uighur culture is the widening gap between the Uighurs in North and South Xinjiang. Those who live in the northern cities of Urumqi, Tirpan and Hami have been exposed to modern Chinese culture. They wear different clothes (hats instead of embroidered caps, no veils for women), are less religious, and

are more progressive about science and education. While the Northern Uighur think of the Southerners as being backward, the Southerners accuse their Northern cousins of no longer being Uighur, but Chinese. As long as the Han Chinese stay out of Southern Xinjiang in significant numbers, these differences will probably continue and perhaps grow sharper. This will depend upon how extensively the railroad is extended into the south.

HISTORY

The name Uighur is an ancient one, and was applied to a people that lived in modern-day Mongolia. Some of them were forced to leave there in the ninth century, and they migrated to their present location, where they mixed with the local Indo-European population but kept their language. This new mixture of peoples did not officially take the name Uighur until 1921. They had previously been known to outsiders as "Turkis" or "Eastern Turkistanis." Those titles are unclear, since they could also be applied to the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, or other Turkic groups. Among themselves, the Uighurs have been known as residents of their particular town or village, and have never had a strong national consciousness. This is understandable when one considers the geographical setting of widely-scattered oases.

The lack of national consciousness is due to another geographical factor. Xinjiang is located in the physical center of Asia, and is surrounded by four great civilizations—Russian, Chinese, Indian, and Iranian. The Turkic peoples in the middle are not a part of any of them, but have felt the political, economic and cultural effects of their larger neighbors. The neighbors have all sought to control this area as a buffer against their rivals and as a base from which to attack them.

Culturally, the Iranians and Indians have had the greatest effects upon the Uighurs. The Buddhist, Manichaeon, Nestorian Christian and Islamic religions have all come over the high mountains in the south with traders and merchants, not only making converts among the Uighurs, but moving on through them to the Tibetans, Mongols, and ultimately the Chinese beyond. Thus, the Xinjiang region has historically been a conduit for religious thought.

*The Uighur
have never
held a strong
national con-
sciousness.*

Abd Al-Hada

The Uighurs of Xinjiang

The high mountains prevented the Indians or Iranians from having any lasting political, military, or economic role in the area. The dominant outside economic influence for many years was the Russians. Particularly after completing the Siberian-Turkestan railway in the 1930's, the Russians dominated trade in the area. The Chinese did not have a railroad into Xinjiang until 1963. With their economic penetration, the Russians tried to impose political control.

But the Chinese have regarded this area as vital to their security since 139 B.C., when they sent a political mission to the area. By 100 B.C., the Han Dynasty had conquered the region, forcing it to pay tribute. They called it *Hsi Yu*, meaning "the Western Region." Their authority disappeared by the end of the dynasty, about 200 A.D. Under the Tang Dynasty, Chinese power was reestablished in 657, and a large army was sent to protect the area.

But at the same time Islam was rising in the West, and in 751 the Prince of Tashkent, aided by the Arabs, defeated the Chinese, who did not return in force for more than 1,000 years. During this time, the region was ruled by small local rulers who sometimes paid tribute to the Chinese, except during the 13th and 14th centuries, when the Mongols were in control.

Chinese authority was established again in the early 1700's under the Manchu (Ching) Dynasty. There was a Muslim rebellion in 1865, but the territory was reconquered in 1875. In 1884 the area was made a full province with the name Xinjiang, meaning "new dominion." A Chinese governor was appointed, and he then filled his top administrative posts with other Chinese brought in from the east. This method of administration has persisted until the present day.

In the first part of this century, events far from Xinjiang began affecting the area in rapid succession. First was the revolution in China that overthrew the Manchu Dynasty in 1911. The new Nationalist (Kuomintang) government was not able to pay much attention to far-off Xinjiang. This forced the governor to look more to the Russians, who in 1917 had their own revolution, which they then endeavored to export.

The invasion of China by Japan, starting in 1931, further decreased the Nationalists' power and allowed a military

warlord named Sheng Shih-ts'ai to take power in the chaos of 1933. He operated Xinjiang as an independent country, establishing diplomatic contacts, trade and military agreements with the Soviets, and he used his allies to crush the Muslims. But in 1941 Russia was invaded by Germany, and Soviet support ended, so Sheng turned to the Nationalists. With this shift, Sheng began to ruthlessly oppress all the non-Chinese national groups, and all political liberals, including his former Communist friends.

But in 1944, the fortunes of war had shifted in Europe, and Sheng again approached Moscow. At this, the Kuomintang removed him and sent out another governor. He immediately had to face a Muslim rebellion that started in Ining (Kuldja). The rebels proclaimed the establishment of the Eastern Turkestan Republic. The Nationalists did not have the power to crush the rebellion, so they negotiated. The agreement in 1946 gave the Uighurs and the other nationalities much greater power, including representation in provincial assembly. However, there was continued political maneuvering, accompanied by riots and oppression. Finally in September, 1949, all the parties in Xinjiang, including the provincial government and the Muslim activists, recognized the new Communist regime in Beijing. From that time on, a new chapter in Uighur history has been written.

The greatest effect of the new government has been the influx of Han Chinese into the region. In 1950, only 10% of the province was Chinese. Now it is 40%! Some observers say that the Uighurs and other nationalities strongly resent this "invasion" almost to the point of outright rebellion.¹ However, the Chinese have made some concessions to the minority peoples, including the establishment of "autonomous" regions for them. In practice, this means the use of minority languages for official business and the inclusion of minorities in the government bureaucracy. More significantly, it has also meant an exemption from the strict birth-control program in effect for the Han Chinese. The Chinese are limited to only one child per family, while the nationalities in Xinjiang may have four.

In spite of these concessions, the Uighur people would like to be independent. One Uighur said, "If I dared to dream, I

would dream that we could have our own country." Others in Turkey are actually daring to dream. They have started a magazine called the *The Voice of Eastern Turkestan*, which agitates for freedom for the Uighur people from the Chinese and Russians. Still others may be taking more aggressive action. One western Christian observer in the area said that Uighurs have been sabotaging the construction of the railroad beyond Korla, reasoning that it would bring in more of the dominating Chinese. Another indication of Uighur-Chinese friction can be seen in the population estimates. The Chinese say that there are less than six million Uighurs in Xinjiang, but some Uighurs maintain that there are as many as 20 million there. The truth is probably somewhere between the two estimates.

RELIGIOUS HISTORY

The Uighurs have had a varied religious history. Originally they had a shamanist type of religion, but later were converted to Buddhism. Nestorian Christians came into the area in the sixth century and stationed bishops at Kasghar and Hami. In the early 700's many Uighurs were converted to Manichaeism, a dualistic religion from Iran. In 762 it was declared the state religion by the Khan of the Uighurs. Then Islam came in the tenth century, starting in Kashgar, and by the 13th century the Uighurs were solidly Muslim. They were heavily influenced by Sufi orders, especially in the 14th through 16th centuries.

Although virtually all are still officially Sunni Muslims, the Uighur are not known to be very orthodox. They drink liquor, and although most women wear scarves on their heads, only some are veiled. Some cities may be more orthodox than others. Khotan was known for its fanaticism in the past. Those in the northern, less Islamic cities such as Urumqi are generally only nominally Muslim.

The Chinese have persecuted Muslims and have tried to suppress Islam throughout their history, most recently during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. The mosques were closed and public prayer forbidden. Some mullahs were paraded around the city with pig heads tied to them. But now, after the "Gang of Four" has been deposed, the policy has been

to cater to all of the minority peoples and to allow more local autonomy and freedom. Thus, there are now 14,000 mosques open in the country, and new imams are being trained in two seminaries. The language has also been returned to the Arabic script.

THE CHRISTIAN WITNESS

The Christian witness to the Uighur people has been minimal, but there was one mission organization that did single them out. In 1892 the Swedish Missionary Society (Svenska Missionsförbundet) sent a group of missionaries to Kashgar. Eventually four mission stations were established. After about 20 years, they began to make converts, and in 1924 the first one was baptized. This caused a riot. But by the early 1930's there was a congregation of 200, plus about 300 children, almost all the adults converts from Islam. One reason for their success could have been the presence of Mehmed Shukri (also known as Johannes Avetarianian), a Muslim convert and evangelist from Turkey, who stayed there ten years. He had previously been a learned imam.²

During this time, the region was under the control of the Chinese, who did not permit the harassment of missionaries. However, in 1932 the civil war broke out between the Communists and the Nationalists, and local Muslim leaders seized this opportunity to rebel. They gained control of the southern part of the province and began to persecute Christians, killing the males and forcing the women to marry Muslims. The women and older male missionaries returned home.

There was a short respite, but then in 1935 Sheng Shih-ts'ai gained control of Kashgar and began to persecute both Muslims and Christians, killing all the leaders of both groups. Only a few Christians survived, some remaining in the province and others escaping over the mountains to India. In 1976 two Swedish visitors to Kashgar asked if anyone remembered the missionaries. They received a negative response. However, the visitors were not Christians, and they did not look very hard.³

The Communist government that assumed control in 1949 soon expelled all the missionaries from China, and very little

was known about the status of Christianity there until recently. Now the estimates of the number of Christians is changing upward with almost every report. However, still very little is known about the status of Xinjiang Christians of any nationality, but especially of the minority nationalities.

STATUS OF THE SCRIPTURES

In 1950 the entire Bible was translated, with use of the Arabic script, by the remnants of the Swedish mission working in India. Recent research has revealed that this translation is not of good quality. It has also become outdated because of modification of the language created by the two script changes. There are now several people working on new translations. An elderly Han Chinese man (converted by Jonathan Goforth!) somewhere in Xinjiang is working on a translation of the Gospel. A small group in England is also doing work.

The Scriptures have also been translated into the Cyrillic script, but this researcher has found no information on this translation. The Bible has never been produced in the Latin script. Research should be done to confirm if this is necessary.

CONCLUSION: BARRIERS TO THE GOSPEL

There are two major barriers to the Gospel among the Uighur people: Communism and Islam. Communism will not allow missionaries of the usual type to enter the country, and Islam discourages the people from listening to a missionary if he does get in. Therefore, a very unusual type of Christian must go to reach this people—one who is willing not only to work under a Communist government but also among a Muslim people.

Our God has a plan for the evangelization of the Uighur people that these formidable barriers cannot prevent from fulfillment! "The Lord of hosts has sworn, saying, 'Surely, just as I have intended, so it has happened, and just as I have planned, so it will stand'" (Isaiah 14:24). In these very days our Lord is revealing His plan to His servants. As we are faithful in praying for the Uighurs, we have the privilege of participation in the fulfillment of His plan. As some have

prayed, God has led them into an even deeper involvement in His purpose so that Uighurs will be among His redeemed who will gather around His glorious throne from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

This article was adapted from a report written for the January 1986 "Extended Family" bulletin published by the Institute of Chinese Studies, 1605 Elizabeth St., Pasadena, California, 91104, USA.

NOTES

- ¹Alan Samagalski, *China—A Travel Survival Kit* (South Yarra, Australia, 1984), p. 786.
- ²Samuel Zwemer, *Heirs of the Prophets*, p. 128.
- ³Jan Myrdal, *The Silk Road* (New York, 1977), p. 50.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- China Church Research Center. "Xinjiang Testimonies, Part V—A Driver's Story," *China and the Church Today*. Hong Kong, Feb. 1985, 7-9.
- Gillette, Ned. "American Skiers Find Adventure in Western China," *National Geographic*, February, 1981, 174-199.
- Gore, Rick. "Journey to China's Far West," *National Geographic*, March, 1980, 292-331.
- Lambert, Tony. "People of the Silk Road," *East Asia Millions*, May/June, 1985, 60-63.
- Manni, Tan. "Urumqi—Multinational City in China's Far West," *China Reconstructs*, January, 1981, 32-39.
- Wingate, Rachel O., *The Steep Ascent—The Story of the Christian Church in Turkestan* (London, 1948).