

## **CONSTRUCTING A CONTEMPORARY UIGHUR NATIONAL IDENTITY : TRANSNATIONALISM, ISLAMICIZATION, AND STATE REPRÉSENTATION**

*Dru C. GLADNEY*

National identities never arise in a vacuum. Rather than purely cultural or primordial bases for identity, national identities are constructed in relation to the interpretation of one's own myths of nostalgic descent from a common ancestry. This imagined identity, to use Benedict Anderson's<sup>1</sup> phrase, is formed in the context of changing socio-economic circumstances - situations most often defined by the nation-state in the modern world, which has regularly abrogated to itself the task of identifying, labelling, and colonising ethnic identities. I have argued in a separate article<sup>2</sup> that the Uighur provide an excellent illustration of this process in which a group of oasis-dwelling Turkic-speaking people shared a general historical experience but did not begin to think of themselves as a single national identity until the early part of this century, when Soviet and Chinese states identified them as one of several Turkic nationalities. Foreigner travel accounts of Xinjiang from the mid-16th century to the early 20th century, by famous explorers such as Muhammad Haidar, Sven Hedin, Paul Pelliot and Owen Lattimore, contained no references to any collective group referred to as Uighur, but instead found people identifying themselves as Turki (from their language family), *Sart* (meaning "caravaneer" in old Persian), and other oasis-based ethnonyms, such as *Kashgarlik*, *Turpanlik*, and *Kotanlik*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London : Verso Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Gladney, Dru C., "The Peoples of the People's Republic : Finally in the Vanguard ?", *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 12.1:62-76, 1990.

I have described elsewhere the process of ethnogenesis in which these separate identities crystallised into the people now known as the Uighur, with a population of 7.2 million according to the reasonably-accurate 1990 census (representing a growth of 20.9 percent over their 1982 population, while the Han only experienced a 10.8 percent growth<sup>3</sup>. While this process is not unique to the Uighur, and indeed has been documented by other case studies of ethnogenesis in China, such as the Hui<sup>4</sup>, the Yi<sup>5</sup>, the Naxi<sup>6</sup>, and the Miao<sup>7</sup>, it is also a natural process of identity formation experienced by many groups of peoples who are often registered and incorporated into the modern nation-state<sup>8</sup>. For the Uighur it has meant both their subjection to Chinese rule as well as their rise as a transnational ethnic group, their coalescence as an entity of 7.2 million that is recognised across China, and now the world - the not entirely unwilling subjects of tourist brochures, religious and political tracts, and academic investigations. I have written about the objectification of this identity and the rise of Uighur identity. What I will do in this paper is explore the consequences, both expected and unexpected, of this essentialized identity for Chinese foreign policy and national identity, which I suggest is tied to these processes: The transnationalization, the Islamicization, and the exoticized representation of the Uighur by the State. I will argue that through processes of transnationalization and Islamicization, which can be illustrated by such events as the Salman Rushdie-like protest, the Trans-Eurasian railway, and the Sino-Saudi Missile deal, the Uighur have been appropriated by the Chinese state in order to promote its foreign policy objectives, particularly in the Muslim Middle East, while the representation in art and the media of the Uighur, and other minorities, as exotic and even erotic, have contributed to

---

<sup>3</sup> Renmin Ribao, "Guanyu 1990 nian renkou pucha zhuyao shuju de gongbao" [Report regarding the 1990 population census main statistics], 14 November 1991:3.

<sup>4</sup> Gladney, Dru C., *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Harrell, Stevan, "The Invention of Ethnicity: The History of the History of the Yi", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> McKhann, Charles F., "The Naxi and the Nationalities Question", Unpublished paper, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Diamond, Norma, "The Miao and Poison: Interactions on China's Southwest Frontier", *Ethnology* 27.1:1-25.

<sup>8</sup> Bentley, G. Carter, "Ethnicity and Practice", *Comparative Study of Society and History* 1: 24-55, 1987. Cohen, Bernard S., "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia", in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, Ed. Bernard S. Cohn, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987. Keyes, Charles F., "The Basis of Ethnic Group Relations in Modern Nation-States", *Ethnic Processes in the USA and the USSR: Material of the Soviet American Symposium*, Edited by V.I. Kozlov, Moscow: INION, The Academy of Sciences, 1984.

the construction of a monolithic Chinese national (Han) identity and the justification of the continued hegemony over the Chinese people.

In this paper I will be arguing, therefore, that the nationalization and transnationalization of a Turkic-speaking, oasis-dwelling people in the Tarim basin of Northwest China, now known as the Uighur, has contributed to the contemporary construction of Chinese national identity in general, and served the specific interests of the Chinese state in its Middle Eastern relations.

### **The transnationalization of the Uighur : Salman Rushdie and Trans-Eurasian Railroads**

Except for a few self-justifying statements by Premier Li Peng, the Chinese government has attempted to put the events of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre behind it. It has not been completely successful. While the world has largely forgotten the uneventful Asian Games of late summer 1989, it still vividly remembers Tiananmen. Nevertheless, a slogan posted throughout China ties the two together vividly : "Unity, Friendship, Progress" (*tuanjie, youyi, jinbu*). This slogan was posted during the Asian Games and still remains on walls and banners throughout China, urging the population to pull together after the tragic crisis, and unite with each other out of friendship for the sake of national progress. The fact that it is posted and translated in such minority languages as Uighur, underscores the government's concern to keep the various peoples of the People's Republic united. "United nationalities" (*minzu tuanjie*) is a slogan that the state has used since the 1950s to urge the country's 56 nationalities to come together for the good of the country. Yet, as I have more fully analysed elsewhere<sup>9</sup>, the phrase is often turned around to mean the unity and ethnic solidarity of the individual nationality *against* the Han majority and state apparatus - a far cry from its Leninist origins in the slogan : "Workers of the world unite !"

The Uighur in Xinjiang are neither friendly, united, or making progress. One unresolved conflict which disgruntles the Uighur, and that stems from the time of Tiananmen, was the "Salman Rushdie-like" protest which took place in Beijing on May 12, 1989, the day that the students, led at that time by the Uighur student, Wu'er Kaixi (Uerkesh Daolet)<sup>10</sup>, declared

---

<sup>9</sup> Dru C. Gladney, 1991, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of his role in Tiananmen, see Gladney, Dru C., "The Ethnogenesis of the Uigur", *Central Asian Survey* 9.1:1-28, 1990.

their hunger fast, which galvanised the nation in support of them. At the very time the government was preparing its tanks and armed mobile units to move against the students, it allowed, indeed strongly supported, a Muslim protest that paraded across Tiananmen square, calling for the banning of a book, *Sexual Customs (Xing Fengsu)* that Muslims found offensive (condemned as "The Satanic Verses of China" it compared minarets to phalli, tombs to vulva, and the pilgrimage to Mecca as an excuse for orgies and sodomy, with camels, no less). In order to demonstrate Muslim solidarity, the protest was led by representatives of four of the ten Muslim nationalities in China, including a Uighur, Hui, Kirghiz, and Khazak, who held aloft their letter of permission from the state and the list of their demands<sup>11</sup>. The state not only met all the demands of the Muslim protesters -banning the book (and allowing its burning in the main square of Lanzhou City), arresting the authors (for their own safety, a collection of 100 000 RMB was taken up by Muslims for their execution, Salman Rushdie-style), and closing the Shanghai Cultural publishing house - it also actively encouraged the protest by providing a police escort and transportation back from the square to the Central Nationalities Institute where it originated.

This event is still unresolved for the Uighur in that there are several Uighur in Urumqi who continue to sit in jail for taking part in the protest. While the state forgave the violent protests of the Hui against the book throughout the country, which included trashing the government building in Lanzhou and overturning and burning a car carrying copies of the book, as well as other violent clashes in Xi'an, Xining, and Kunming, it has not yet released several Uighur who were arrested for taking part in the 19 May 1989 Urumqi protest, a protest the Uighur claim was instigated by Hui from Gansu who brought the book, written in Chinese, to the attention of the Uighur. While several reasons may be given for this seeming inconsistency, here I might only suggest that it underlines the continued uneasiness that the Chinese government feels about unrest and political involvement in the Northwest border area of Xinjiang. While the government has promoted Hui exchange with the Middle East (see below), and has been more tolerant of recent Hui protests (such as a recent incident in November 1990 in Yunnan where the State moved quickly to ameliorate a conflict between Hui and Han over an auto accident), it has been quick to crack down on any Uighur political or ethnic strife, such as the Qurban uprising in June 1988<sup>12</sup>, that led

---

<sup>11</sup> Pictures of the leaders of the protest, as well as the march across Tiananmen Square, are reproduced in Dru C. Gladney, 1991, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> FBIS (Foreign Broadcasting Information Service), "600 Uyghurs Demonstrate in Xinjiang Capital", 21 June 1988.

to several arrests of student leaders, and the March 1990 incident in Artush, near Aksu, that caused the deaths of at least 24 Uighur and Kirghiz. The state is much more nervous about Turkic unrest on its Northwest border with Soviet Central Asia than among its more domestic, internal Hui Muslims.

Then why promote a Sino-Eurasian railway that runs right through Soviet and Chinese Central Asia ? Tracks were laid for this railway during the heyday of Sino-Soviet rapprochement in the late 1950s, but were actually torn out in 1962 after the breakdown in those relations and the exodus of nearly 60 000 Kazakh and Uighur from the Ili area. In 1987 the state began renegotiating the reestablishment of the railroad - a time of relative peacefulness in Chinese and Soviet Central Asia. One Chinese railroad engineer that I spoke with in Samarkand in September 1987, who was part of a joint investigative team to lay the grounds for the project, argued that the railway would do little to benefit Central Asia, it was seen more as a southern link between Eastern Europe, Moscow, and Beijing. Central Asia was thought to benefit little from the railway, nor was it to be easily disrupted by tensions in the area, much as the Trans-Siberian railway has had little impact on Inner and Outer Mongolian economies and national identity, though it has been open continually for the last two decades and has benefited Sino-Soviet trade tremendously. The Trans-Eurasian railway was completed in the Fall of 1990, far ahead of the 1992 schedule<sup>13</sup>, and has already led to a jump in Sino-Soviet trade. While the 1988 trade was reported at 100 million Swiss Francs (an increase from 21 million in 1987)<sup>14</sup>, contracts for 200 million signed in 1988 have already largely been met<sup>15</sup>. While state planners in China may be worried what the fall-out from Glasnost and national movements in the USSR will have on this project, their going ahead with it signals Chinese determination to maintain control of the Central Asian rail link, no matter what the economic and political costs.

There have been several unintended consequences for Uighur transnational identity from both the Salman Rushdie and Trans-Eurasian railroad events. Uighur are now more and more convinced that the state is making a clear distinction between its promotion of the Hui on a national level and the Uighur. The prosecution of Uighur in Xinjiang, and the release of Hui in Gansu and Qinghai, for the same protest, has demonstrated on a national scale that the state treats these Muslim minorities differently. In

---

<sup>13</sup> FBIS "Kazakhstan- Xinjiang Railroad Completion in View", 18 October 1988.

<sup>14</sup> FBIS, "Xinjiang-USSR Volume of Border Trade Increases", 15 June 1988.

<sup>15</sup> FBIS, "Protocol Signed", 24 October 1988.

Xinjiang, the Hui have long felt disgruntled that they find themselves in an autonomous region which nominally belongs to the Uighurs, and whose People's Government is largely staffed by Turkic Muslims, whereas most Hui in Xinjiang are post-1950 immigrants who do not speak Turkic languages, and mainly Chinese dialects<sup>16</sup>. But on a national scale, the Hui have enjoyed more official government support, perhaps due to their cultural proximity to the Han, dispersment throughout all of China, and status as the most populous Muslim minority. Government-sponsored exchanges with the Middle East have featured more Hui interests and involvement, and while there is a Ningxia Branch of the State-sponsored Middle Eastern Construction Corporations, there is as yet no Xinjiang branch. Nevertheless, on a private level, the Uighur may be taking better advantage of the situation.

Individual Uighur travel abroad has been enormously facilitated by the opening of the Karakorum highway into Pakistan in May 1986, and the border with Alma Ata in 1987. Unlike the Hui, the Uighur have many relatives abroad in Soviet Central Asia, the Middle East, and Turkey (many of whom fled there in the 1940s), who assist them with obtaining the invitations, visas, and hard currency necessary for foreign travel<sup>17</sup>. Out of 34 students from China at the prestigious Al Azhar University in Cairo, only 6 were Hui, while the rest were all Uighurs, studying on private scholarships from relatives, Saudi Arabia, and the Al Azhar university. The Trans-Eurasian railway may assist their getting there. One Uighur at the Al Azhar University with whom I spoke said that he travelled to Egypt via the Trans-Siberian railway from Beijing to Moscow, and from there to Europe, Turkey, and finally Cairo, all through the support of his relatives. "If I could have taken the Xinjiang train to Tashkent", he stated, "and then gone on to Turkey, I could have saved a lot of money". The Karakorum road to Pakistan is still a tortuous journey of at least 6 days, with frequent closings and hazards. The rail link should prove to be much more convenient for building trans-national links. One Uighur whom I met in China over the recent Spring festival was one of three Uighur who were part of a Sino-Soviet educational exchange of 200 students last Fall. This Uighur came to

---

<sup>16</sup> For Hui-Uighur relations in Xinjiang, see Forbes, Andrew D.W., "The Role of the Hui Muslims (Tungans) in Republican Sinkiang", Paper presented at the Second European Seminar on Central Asian Studies, University of London (SOAS), 7-10 April, 1987.; Gladney, Dru C., "Hui-Uigur Relations in the Political Economy of Xinjiang", Paper presented at The Association of Asian Studies Annual Meetings, San Francisco, 25-27 March, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Alptekin, Erkin, 1988, "Relations between Eastern and Western Turkestan", 30 November 1988 : Radio Liberty Research.

China via the railroad and stated that it is being actively pursued by other Uighurs and Central Asians for private travel, though the trade is still primarily oriented to Moscow and Beijing. Pilgrimage to Mecca has increased from the first state-sponsored group since 1964 of 19 in 1979 to over 6 000 last year, most of them privately financed<sup>18</sup>.

### **Islamicization and Chinese Geopolitics**

Only in the last few years has China once again attempted to play its "Islamic card" - a strategy begun in the 1950s of promoting its Muslims, and positive policies toward its Muslim minorities, in order to gain favor with mainly Muslim Middle Eastern countries. I regard this as a case of the "Islamicization" of a geopolitical issue and the minorities involved, not the conversion of most Uighurs to Islam, a process which began in the early 15th century<sup>19</sup>, in that in this case Islam is used by the state as a means of promoting international relations, rather than as a religious ideology to be followed. On the surface the state exploits its favorable policies towards Muslims, but in reality as a communist state it actively discourages Islamic practice.

James Piscatori<sup>20</sup> in his essay on the nature of international relations among Asian Muslim countries, writes : "China, without the burden of Afghanistan, is more effective (than the Soviet Union) in the use of Islam in its relations with the Arab states ... (T)he regime in Beijing believes that the use of Islam can help to legitimate it in the eyes of the Arab regimes, and the record shows that it has had some success at it". It was not always successful, however. The first delegation of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca in 1953 were denied visas in Pakistan, and the impasse was not resolved until Zhou Enlai himself, during the Bandung conference in April 1955, approached Prince Faysal ibn Sa'ud about the problem, signalling the importance the Chinese government places on resolving this issue<sup>21</sup>. As a result of Zhou Enlai's Islamic diplomacy, the pilgrimages were allowed to

---

<sup>18</sup> Shichor, Yitzhak, *East Wind over Arabia . Origins and Implications of the Sino-Saudi Missile Deal*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1989, p. 7 ; Dru C. Gladney, 1991, 400 ff, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Dru C. Gladney, 1990, *op. cit.*, p. 9-11. Haneda, Akira, "Introduction : The Problems of Turkicization and Islamization of East Turkestan", *Acta Asiatica* 34 (1978) : 1-21, 1978,.

<sup>20</sup> Piscatori, James P., "Asian Islam : International Linkages and Their Impact on International Relations" in John L. Esposito, ed. *Islam in Asia, vol.II* Ed. Raphael Israeli and Anthony H. Johns, Boulder : Westview Press, 1984, p. 247.

<sup>21</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, *op. cit.*, p. 3

began with a maximum of 20 Muslims from China every year, led by two Hui, Da Pusheng and Ma Yuhuai, in July 1955.

At the New Delhi conference of Asian Countries in April 1955, the Uighur political leader and recent Vice-Chairman of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress, Saifudin, was sent to introduce China's new Middle East policy, which was long on criticism of Western imperialism, and noticeably short on the Marxist critique of Islam. In February 1956, Burhan Shahidi, a Uighur from Xinjiang and the Chairman of the China Islamic Society<sup>22</sup>, led the second delegation of hajji in which he followed the usual China-encouraged practice of combining pilgrimage with politics : While in the Middle East he met with King Sa'ud of Saudi Arabia, King Husayn of Jordan, and Nasser of Egypt, as well as the premiers of Lebanon, Syria, and possibly North Yemen<sup>23</sup>. As a direct result of his meeting with Nasser, Egypt became the first Middle Eastern Muslim country to diplomatically recognise the PRC on 16 May 1956, severing its ties with Taiwan. It was followed by Syria (1956), N. Yemen (1956), S. Yemen (1968), and only much later, Kuwait (1971), the U.A.E. (1984), and most recently, Saudi Arabia (1990). The recognition by Egypt in 1956 was extremely important to China in that it was the first country to recognise the PRC in 6 years, causing the first crack in the diplomatic blockade, and regarded as quite a coup for the Muslim delegation. Burhan supervised the pilgrimages every year until their termination at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1964. From the very beginning, the recognition of China by Egypt was linked to the arms trade : by recognition China which was not at that time a member of the United Nations, Nasser had managed to obtain a back channel for arms from the Soviet Union (which was barred from arms exports to Egypt due to the UN blockade). Later, it was arms sales that once again led to the final recognition of China by Saudi Arabia, despite its superior volume of trade with Taiwan.

The Islamic card was essentially discarded during the "20 lost years" (instead of the usual 10 years of the Cultural Revolution) from the beginning of the Anti-Rightist and Religious System Reform Campaigns in 1957-8 to 1978 when, according to China's Muslims, China adopted an antagonistic stance to Muslims who were regarded as feudalistic due to their belief in religion and their local nationalism. Since the 1979 reforms, this card again has been pulled from Deng Xiaoping's sleeve. Muslims have benefited from

---

<sup>22</sup> Burhan Shahidi, *Xinjiang Wushi Nian* [Xinjiang : Fifty Years], Beijing: Wenshi Ziliao Chubanshe, 1984.

<sup>23</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-5.

both increased exchange with the Middle East and favourable government policies. In order to promote its positive policies toward Muslims, the state has been engaged in an Islamic facelift of government buildings in Urumqi and Yinchuan, and recently, the building of a "Muslim Hotel and Shopping Complex" in downtown Beijing, which was funded by the State-sponsored Beijing City Tourism Association, the Beijing City Nationality Affairs Commission, and a privately organised, Beijing Muslim Development Corporation. In addition, it has sought to promote Muslim areas such as Oxen Street in Beijing and Islamic monuments in Quanzhou, Fujian, as Muslim tourist sites. This policy has led to considerably increased exchange between China and the Middle East, with such projects as the Xiamen International airport and the Fujian Hydroelectric Minjiang Dam project funded by the Kuwaitis as a direct result of this policy.

The selling of Chinese Silkworm missiles to Saudi Arabia is extraordinarily well-detailed in Shichor's<sup>24</sup> monograph, and need not be further discussed here. It is important to note that the sale went through before the recognition of China by Saudi Arabia, a move that was not taken until the summer of 1990, despite an even larger trade volume with Taiwan. It is only one example, however, of China's growing arms trade with the Middle East. Iraq, with whom China immediately established relations 2 days after the Baathist revolution in 1958 in order to show its solidarity with what it regarded as the first "real revolution" in the Middle East<sup>25</sup>, and long thought to be a close friend of China's until the invasion of Kuwait, fired two Silkworm missiles at U.S. ships during the war, and exchanged countless more with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, as part of over \$12 billion dollars' worth of arms deals with China<sup>26</sup>. Egypt, surprisingly enough, is the proud owner of Chinese-made submarines. While exact trade figures are hard to come by, and rarely include military transfers, the IMF recorded that between 1982 and 1988 China exported a total of \$ 2,089 million and imported only \$577 million with 14 Arab states and Iran<sup>27</sup>. Shichor<sup>28</sup> estimates that before the Gulf War there were nearly 70 special Chinese construction corporations working in the Middle East, many of them led by Muslims, with an average of 50 000 Chinese workers every year in the Middle-East, and a total turnover of US \$8 billion. There were supposedly over 4 000 Chinese workers stuck in Iraq after the war began, whom the

---

<sup>24</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, "Unfolded Arms : Beijing's Recent Military Sales Offensive", *The Pacific Review* 1 (3), 1988, pp. 320-1.

<sup>27</sup> International Monetary Fund, Year book Review, 1990.

<sup>28</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 14.

Iraqis initially refused permission to leave<sup>29</sup>, and up to 10 000 Chinese workers in Egypt at the height of their trade in 1985-87.

One Uighur interpreter for the Liaoning Branch of the Chinese Construction Corporation in Egypt, the most successful Chinese construction team (nearly every province except Xinjiang, and some cities, including Tianjin, have branch offices in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries), explained to me in Cairo recently why it is that the Egyptians would be interested in Chinese labour in a country that has abundant resources of its own. While the Egyptians have their own cheap labour, Chinese companies are able to underbid Egyptian and other foreign companies for lucrative construction contracts. Chinese workers are also known to be skilled, efficient, and diligent - a reputation that few other Third World construction companies can match. A Chinese worker can average from US \$80-150 per month in hard currency, which is paltry by world standards, but a fortune compared to the average RMB \$50-150 (=US \$10-30) earned by workers in China in local currency, which is not exchangeable. Companies such as the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Muslim Construction Corporation, established by the former Ningxia Chairman, Hei Boli, and Vice-Chairman, Ma Tengai, both Hui Muslims, are attractive to foreign Muslim governments and Muslim Chinese workers as well.

Now that China has experienced a more difficult climate for investment opportunities from the West, due to a slow return of Western businesses after Tiananmen, and the restriction of Chinese student visas to English-speaking Western countries, the importance of its Middle East trading partners has increased as a source for hard currency. It is not surprising, therefore, that Arabic is increasing in importance as a means for studying abroad. Once thought to have mainly religious-occupation value, enabling students to become Imam in the mosque, Arabic has grown as an important second language for business purposes. Hajji Muhammad Zhang Zhihua, currently an Arabic teacher at the Arab and African Studies Institute at Beijing's Number Two Foreign Languages College (which mainly trains foreign interpreters and tour guides), served several years in Egypt and the Middle East as an interpreter for state-sponsored construction projects. He was one of the first Hui Muslim students trained by the state in Arabic and Quranic studies at the China Islamic Association in Beijing, and his first teachers were both from Egypt, so he speaks fluent Egyptian Arabic. Hajji Muhammad Zhang's Arabic classes were so popular that two-thirds of his

---

<sup>29</sup> Harris, Lillian Craig, "China's Middle East position damaged by Gulf crisis", *Al Ahrum Weekly* 28 March 1991:7.

100 students were privately paying their own tuition, unlike the officially matriculated state-supported students at the university who virtually attend free, in order to become interpreters in the Middle East, or increase their chances of receiving scholarships to attend Middle Eastern universities, since it is so difficult to get into Chinese universities or go to English-speaking countries.

China's Party Chairman, Yang Shangkun, in his visit to six Middle Eastern countries after the Tiananmen massacre, underscored the new importance that China placed on its Middle Eastern relations by affirming its continued commitment to trade with the Middle East, political stability, and fair treatment of Muslims. In a surprising move that underscored the importance China places upon its relationship with Egypt, he unexpectedly announced that China would donate the multimillion dollar International Conference Center in the Heliopolis suburb of Cairo, which Chinese construction firms had been engaged in building for the last three years. Along with the large Cairo Stadium, which was also built by the Chinese, as well as the Cornish highway along the Nile, the International Conference Center stands as yet another monument to improving Sino-Egyptian relations.

As one of 5 members of the United Nation's Security Council, and despite a long-term friendship with Iraq, China went along with most of the UN resolutions in the war against Iraq. Although it abstained from Resolution 678, making it unlikely that Chinese workers will be welcomed back into Kuwait<sup>30</sup>, it enjoys a relatively untarnished reputation in the Middle East as a valuable source for low-grade weaponry and cheap labour<sup>31</sup>.

But what does this have to do with the Uighur ? The enormous exchange of workers, pilgrims, and students to the Middle East has allowed the Uighur many more opportunities to travel abroad, re-establish connections with relatives, and become exposed to the Turkish and Muslim world outside of China. The late Joseph Fletcher has long argued that China was very much in tune with socioreligious movements in the Middle East, and that each "tide" of Islamic influence in China resulted from the opening

---

<sup>30</sup> Harris, Lillian Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> For an analysis of the Muslim Chinese response to Saddam Hussein, see Gladney, Dru C., "Of Hearts and Minds : The Muslim Chinese Response to Saddam Hussein", unpublished manuscript and "The Gulf Crisis and Harris, Lillian Craig, China's Middle East Dilemma", *Pacific Review* (forthcoming).

of China to the movement of Muslims, mostly on the Hajj, between China and the pilgrimage cities<sup>32</sup>. While speaking with a Uighur factory worker in Istanbul's Zeytin Burnu district in 1988, where most of the Turkic immigrants from China are concentrated, I was surprised to learn that though he referred to Xin jiang as *Dogu Turkestan* (East Turkestan), he still regarded himself as a Uighur, and hoped to return someday to promote Islam among his people. In the late 19th and early 20th century, most of the Muslims who were to exert substantial influence on Islam in China studied at the Al Azhar University, the oldest University in the world and the foremost Sunni Islamic training institution<sup>33</sup>.

I already noted that 28 of 34 students from China at the prestigious Al Azhar University in Cairo are Uighur, most of whom are financed by loans from relatives and scholarships from the Mecca-based Muslim World League. Muslims from China complain that while the Egyptian government provides for 10 scholarships per year to the Al Azhar Islamic University, the Chinese government has not taken advantage of them since the first group of 10 students (including 2 visiting scholars) was sent in 1981. The Chinese government claims that the terms of the scholarships, which include room and board, free tuition, and LE \$50 per month (= US \$16), are not adequate for the students to live on, though it is the same given to the majority of other Third World students. By contrast, the Chinese government does allow 10 students per year to take advantage similar of scholarships at Cairo University, and supports Egyptian students studying Chinese at Ain Shams University. This led one Hui student at Al Azhar to complain to me that "The Chinese government only wants its students to come to Egypt to study science, not religion, even though it claims to support open study abroad".

Indeed, the example of one Uighur student at the Al Azhar supports this view. He was one of 3 Uighur (in addition to 6 Hui and 1 Kazakh) among the first group that came to the Al Azhar on a state-sponsored exchange in 1981. He described that though he grew up in a fairly average, not especially religious, Uighur household in Urumqi, in 1980 he was one of

---

<sup>32</sup> Fletcher, Joseph F., "The Sufi 'paths' (*turuq*) in China". Unpublished manuscript, Harvard University, French version published as "Les 'voies' (*turuq*) soufies en Chine", in *Les ordres mystiques dans l'Islam, cheminements et situation actuelle*, A. Popovic, G. Veinstein (dir.), Paris, 1988.

<sup>33</sup> For an interesting Chinese summary of this earlier period, see Pang Shiqian, *Aiji Jiu Nian* [Nine Years in Egypt], 1st edition, 1951, Beijing: China Islamic Association Publishing Society, 1988. For a recent discussion of the role of the Al Azhar in educating China's Muslims, see Ma Yunfu and Yang Zhihua, eds, *Aizihaer Daxue* [Al Azhar University], Changsha : Hunan Educational Publishing Society, 1988.

10 Uighur high school students selected to take an exam to test his general knowledge and Arabic. Though he claimed to not know any Arabic, and very little about Islam, he was selected to travel to the China Islamic Society in Beijing, where he studied Arabic for 6 months before being sent to the Al Azhar. Since his Arabic was poor, he studied for another 2 years, then was required to repeat High School, since the Al Azhar did not recognise his Chinese diploma. After a year and a half, he tested into the university, where he studied for four more years, completing his B.A. degree in 1990. He now works as a translator for a Chinese construction team in Cairo, and is waiting to return to China, where he says he will probably be assigned to teach Arabic at the China Islamic Association. It is clear that while there are many more conservative, even fundamentalist, Muslims in China desiring to study abroad at the Al Azhar and elsewhere, the Chinese government is supporting those who are less religiously inclined. It is so concerned about promoting Islam through these academic exchanges, that it now only supports study at Cairo University, not the Al Azhar. All the other students from China at the Al Azhar were on private scholarships from relatives and Saudi Arabia. Since Hui Muslims have few relatives abroad, the majority of these are Uighur, and the vast majority of Muslims from China residing in Saudi Arabia and Turkey are Uighur as a result. If and when these Uighur do return to their homes in Xinjiang, one can expect that they will exert tremendous influence as has been found historically among returned Muslim Hajji and Islamic scholars to China<sup>34</sup>.

While the Chinese government publicly asserts that it is allowing the free religious expression of Islam in China, and allowing its Muslims to travel abroad, it is clear that it is only tolerating a minimum of Islam in order to maximise its format relations with the Middle-East. While the Uighur and the Hui are willing to be used as players in China's manipulation of the Islamic card, it is clear that they are exploiting the opportunities as much as possible for their own benefit - moves which may lead to unexpected consequences for the Chinese government, despite its efforts to control the situation.

### **The Exoticization and Eroticization of the Uighur and other "Others" in Chinese Society**

Recognition and promotion of its Muslim and other minorities serves a national as well as an international goal, that of constructing a

---

<sup>34</sup> Fletcher, Joseph F., *op. cit.*, 1988 ; Gladney, Dru C., "Muslim Tombs and Ethnic Folklore : Charters for Hui Identity", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, n°3, 1987, pp. 495-532.

coherent Chinese self. While there is not enough space here to go into the history of the policy of recognising and identifying the minorities of China, I argue elsewhere that one of the reasons that this policy was so useful to the early Chinese nationalists was the role the minorities played in the construction of the Chinese self. Dr. Sun Yatsen, the recognised father of both China, was a Cantonese, raised in Hawaii, who hardly spoke Mandarin. In a famous speech he stated that in the face of Western and Japanese imperialism, "the Chinese are like a sheet of loose sand ... The unity of the Chinese people has stopped short at the clan and has not extended to the nation ..."<sup>35</sup>. One of his policies that proved extremely useful in unifying China was the Five People's (*wu zu gonghe*) doctrine which argued that China was comprised of the Han, as well as four other peoples, the Manchu, who the nationalists were engaged in overthrowing as the overlords of the Qing empire, and the Tibetan (*Zang*), Mongolian (*Meng*), and Hui, which included the Uighur and all other Muslim believers at that time. The political unity, and cultural similarity, of the Han, was contrasted to the foreignness, and perhaps, barbarity, of these internal Others, and the external foreign Others, with whom the Han were in opposition. This supports John Comaroff's<sup>36</sup> view that ethnic identity is constructed primarily in totemic opposition to an "Other", that, like totems, gain meaning only in relation to other totems in a closed system of religious signification. In China, by contrasting these Others with the Han Chinese "Self", they could more easily overcome the vast cultural, political, and linguistic differences separating Cantonese, Mandarin, Fujianese, Sichuanese, and the myriad other regional groups. Dr. Sun invoked the concept of the *minzu* (variously glossed as nationality, ethnic group, and people) which he derived from the Japanese *minzoku* (same Chinese characters, different pronunciation), to promote this cultural hegemony of the Han. The Han were one *minzu*, while the others were also *minzu*, waiting to be identified by the state, a process actively engaged in by the Chinese communists armed with Soviet Stalinist ideas of nationalism in the 1950s.

While I and others have documented the results of this process of ethnic identification, the colonisation and integration of these exotic peoples into China, representing them as happily singing and dancing in symbolic tribute of their gratefulness for being delivered from their primitive pasts by the civilised Han Chinese, few have been willing to draw the argument to its

---

<sup>35</sup> Sun Yatsen, *The Three Principles of the People . San Min Chu I*, Taipei : China Publishing Company, 1924, pp, 2-5.

<sup>36</sup> Comaroff, John, "Of Totemism and Ethnicity : Consciousness, Practice and the Signs of Inequality", *Ethnos* 52 (3-4) : 301-323, 1987, p. 310.

logical conclusions : if minority identities are so tenuously constructed through what Partha Chatterjee<sup>37</sup> terms this derivative discourse of nationalism, what about the construction of Han Chinese identity ? Their mono-ethnicity, long taken for granted, must now be challenged. Differences between Cantonese and Mandarin, Southern and Northern Fujianese, and Shanghainese and Sichuanese are more than regional. Yet the general acceptance of one, monolithic Han cultural group has proved quite useful for the Chinese state. It not only keeps the amount of the minorities few and unthreatening (only 8% of the total population), but it allows for the suppression of difference within 91% of China. Since the majority of Chinese are one ethnic group, the Han, the state is allowed to suppress all difference within that group, whether it be cultural, linguistic, moral or political, in the name of representing the voice of the people. This is precisely why the representation of the Other becomes so important : the exoticization, and indeed, frequent eroticization, of the minorities in China serves as a daily reminder of the cultural and moral superiority of the Confucian Han.

If erotic images and public portrayals of Han Chinese sexuality are a basic aspect of everyday life in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Chinese Southeast Asia, why have they been so absent, so repressed, in the China mainland since 1949, except for the portrayal of minorities ? Here I would follow George Mosse's<sup>38</sup> argument regarding the political connection between totalitarianism and sexuality. Unlicensed sexuality represents a threat to totalitarian regimes. If Foucault<sup>39</sup> is correct that the "policing of sex" is an important component in maintaining the unmitigated power of the central state, then China's repressiveness is perhaps the best example of this endeavor. The heightened policing of sex tends to also coincide with radical leftist authoritarian campaigns in China, e.g., the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution, the 1984 Spiritual Pollution campaign, and the more recent post-Tiananmen 1989-90 Six Evils campaign, in which public sexuality, pornography, and prostitution were all condemned as "feudalist". China is one of the few non-Islamic nations where prostitutes, pimps, and purveyors of pornography are routinely arrested and executed. Even slightly erotic films such as Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, and more recent, *Ju Dou*, are routinely banned once these political winds prevail. It is only minority

---

<sup>37</sup> Chatterjee, Partha, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, London : Zed Books, 1986.

<sup>38</sup> Mosse, George L., *Nationalism and Sexuality . Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, Madison : University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, Trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1, New York : Vintage Press, 1980, p. 24.

eroticism which is allowed to escape the panoptic censors of the prudish Chinese state.

In a country that stringently restricts the proliferation of "pornography", so much so that it withdrew Zhang Yimou's film *Ju Dou* from consideration for an academic award, and prematurely closed a Beijing Fine Arts Museum display of "The Exhibition of Nude Paintings" (*Luoti Huaxiang Zhanlan*) after only 2 weeks in 1988 (despite its enormous popularity and profitable ticket sales of 5 yuan over the normal 15 fen), it is all the more extraordinary to see frequent exhibitions of nude minority art.

For example, in Qin Yuanyue's painting, entitled *Nude*, there is a portrayal of a woman, probably a minority, and quite possibly a Uighur (wearing a Central Asian style headscarf), on a background of minority art<sup>40</sup>. Qin is a painter at the Central Institute of Nationalities in Beijing, where many minorities are trained by the state. Joan Cohen's<sup>41</sup> commentary on the painting reads: "Qin Yuanyue's voluptuous beauty is set against a curtain-like backdrop of primitively sketched men and beasts. Qin found a rejuvenating energy in these forms, which set the tone for the Expressionist composition". Another famous painting is that of Liu Bingjiang's *Nude*, shown at the Oil Painting Research Association Exhibition in Beijing 1979. It is also clearly a minority representation, given the Central Asian tapestry background, her jewellery, and most importantly, her posture. The figure is portrayed as kneeling, perhaps submissively, with both hands placed on the floor in front of her. According to Joan Leopold Cohen<sup>42</sup>, the kneeling position is not within the officially sanctioned "academic painting repertoire" and thus suggests a South Asian or minority influence. Note also that she is adorned with bracelets, bearing a striking resemblance to shackles, and that this, along with the posture, reflects subservience and submission. Cohen goes on to note:

*The fact that this painting, so reminiscent of a calendar pinup, was exhibited without criticism during October, 1979 - when the initial volleys were being fired at Yuan Yunsheng's [Thai bather] nudes - proves the complexity of art and politics. It suggests that criticism of nudes may not*

---

<sup>40</sup> Many of these paintings may be found in Joan L. Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1986*, New York Harry N. Adams, Inc., 1987.

<sup>41</sup> Joan L. Cohen, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 75.

<sup>42</sup> Joan L. Cohen, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 46.

*have been the issue, but rather a personal or factional attack involving power politics*<sup>43</sup>.

Cohen systematically ignores the possibility that the reason these paintings are allowed to be exhibited is because they portray *minority women*, not Han women, who are not allowed to be publicly represented in such a "demeaning" way. Unlike abstract Han figure paintings, it has been and still is officially acceptable to vividly and realistically paint, exhibit, and sell minority nude artwork. By representing minority women as free, sensual, and innocent, Han women are then, by contrast, clearly revealed as controlled, submissive, and moral - paragons of Confucian virtue and "high" civilisation.

In this regard, Chen Zhangpeng's oil of a nude is appropriately titled, *Innocence*. Cohen's revealing caption notes: "Chen's sketchy study of a nude kneeling next to a tiger expresses the ancient Chinese idea that the untrammelled nature of the wild creature is innocent. Likewise, primitive people, uncorrupted by civilisation, are innocent, a concept similar to Rousseau's romantic notion of the noble savage"<sup>44</sup>.

The most well-known motif among Chinese erotic art is that of Thai women bathing, of which there are countless examples, but the most celebrated is the Capital Airport mural by Yuan Yunsheng, a mural that was eventually covered up. Yuan Yunsheng returned from 16 years of exile in Manchuria to be assigned by the State to paint a mural on a dining room wall at the Beijing airport in 1979. He chose for his subject the Dai (Thai) people of Xishuangbanna, whom he portrayed in his *Water Festival. Song of Life* on the background of a floral jungle motif, working, dancing, and, of course, bathing. "In addition to dragon boats, tropical plants, flowers, and birds, about a hundred figures in different poses and costumes - including two nude women - appeared in the mural"<sup>45</sup>. That apparently was two public nudes too many. The bathing mural on the far right side of the room eventually proved too problematic. Although the mural was proudly displayed in many official Chinese publications from October 1979 to early 1980, local government cadres began to object that the bathing mural was simply too erotic for public display. It had also been causing a disruption in the dining room where it was exhibited due to the crowds of people who went to view it. In March 1981, the offending panel was covered up, despite a Dai delegation

---

<sup>43</sup> Joan L. Cohen, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 461.

<sup>44</sup> Joan L. Cohen, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 65.

<sup>45</sup> Joan L. Cohen, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 39.

that found no offense in the bathing portrayal<sup>46</sup>. While the nudes eventually proved so offensive that the mural was covered up, I would argue that their approved painting in the first place, and displayal for nearly half a year, demonstrated that the erotic portrayal of minority women was officially sanctioned.

### **Eroticizing the Uighur**

Surprisingly enough, even the Muslim Uighur do not escape public eroticization. While Uighur are often portrayed in the Chinese media as erotic, singing and dancing, able to balance water melons on their heads, they are generally recognised as Muslims, and therefore their women are not often portrayed as sensually as other minority women. Travellers in Xinjiang have long noted that of all the Muslim clothing styles associated with *purdah*, the Uighur are perhaps the most covered. Uighur women traditionally wear a brown wrap and veil that envelopes their entire body, face, and hair, with only their hands exposed to make purchases in the marketplace. The veil is so constructed that the women can discern vague shapes through the gauzelike material, observing the shapes and shapes of others, without themselves, or even their eyes, from being observed.

Nevertheless, a very popular artistic subject is that of the Buddhist paintings of flying, heavenly dancers at Dunhuang. When viewing one of these typical murals at the *Sheng Tang* (Ascendant Tang) Hotel in Beijing in January 1990, several of the Han scholars I was with surprised me by arguing that the women dancers were definitely minorities, and most probably Uighur. This idea was confirmed by several other paintings which portrayed Uighur dancers and musicians who, through their music, conjured up these erotic Buddhist images.

A Uighur Muslim kneels to play his traditional Saz reed flute. But the images conjured are anything but Islamic. In this Chinese tourist pictorial, *A Picture Album of Turpan Landscape and Custom*<sup>47</sup>, a Han artist, Gu Shengyue, portrays the sensual images of the Dunhuang caves, with floating female Absarases and their accentuated breasts, hovering above him, almost as if to say "Though these Uighur claim to be conservative Muslims, we know what they are really thinking about when they sing and dance".

---

<sup>46</sup> Joan L. Cohen, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 39-41.

<sup>47</sup> *A Picture Album of Turpan Landscape and Custom* (Tulufan Fengqing Huaji), Urumqi : Xinjiang People's Press, 1985, p. 16.

A similar representation of this Han supposition is in the woodblock sketch, *Mirage*, by the Han artist Jiang Zhenhua, where the sky is again filled with erotic Buddhist images as the Muslim Uighurs dance below<sup>48</sup>.

Even more realistic, is the figure painting *Nude with Apples*, by Tang Muli<sup>49</sup>, a Han artist who has travelled widely abroad. With a Central Asian hat, sitting upon a Xinjiang carnet, and eating apples, produced primarily in China's dry, cold Northwest, the Realist painting is clearly meant to portray a Central Asian minority, though the model may very well be Han. Perhaps Tang knew that a Han woman could never be portrayed so vividly and realistically.

Finally, the most remarkable portrayal of the Uighur that I have discovered is found in the Zhao Yixiong's 1979 oil, *The Awakening of Tarim*. Of this controversial painting, which was not officially exhibited, Cohen<sup>50</sup> writes : "Tarim symbolises the beginnings of modernisation on the edges of the great Takla Makan, China's most terrible desert. She awakens on a vibrant patchwork of Silk Road images : camels, mosques, oil derricks, Buddhist deities, oases, grapes, gourds, and pomegranates".

This last painting makes the dramatic linkage between nationality, the Uighur and the State : by depicting his Uighur subject as "awakening" from the midst of her traditional life in a modern world, Zhao Yixiong suggests that it is only by throwing off the traditional minority culture of Islam, with its covered women, mosques, and caravans, that Tarim, the woman and the region, can be modernised. With the carnet caravans and mosque minaret literally emerging from between her thighs, this painting would, of course, be extremely offensive to Uighurs. It nevertheless was permitted to be painted by Zhao Yixiong, who, as a painter for the Chinese Museum of Chinese History and Revolution, is employed by the state to represent the Other in China's past and present. Why was Zhao's painting not allowed to be exhibited ? According to Cohen, "The [Oil Painting Research Association] excluded it because of the green streak on the woman's buttocks - an Expressionist gesture that was apparently thought to be offensive".

*Realistic representation* of the Han female body is offensive to the Chinese state, while in a remarkable reversal it is *Expressionistic*

---

<sup>48</sup> *A Picture Album of Turpan Landscape and Custom*, *op. cit.*, 1985, p. 45.

<sup>49</sup> Joan L. Cohen, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 101

<sup>50</sup> Joan L. Cohen, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 54

*representation* that has been rejected for this minority portraiture. Just as the subordination of Chinese women reifies the elevated position of men, so the exoticization of minorities essentializes the imagined identity of the Han, and reaffirms Han feelings of superiority. In a post-Confucian society, gender and ethnic hierarchies continue to be articulated in a discourse of morality - the proper ordering of the social universe. To content that order, as in the film *Ju Dou*, and in the minority protests over their representation in the public media, is to challenge the state's traditional authority, something for which the leaders in Beijing show little sign of being ready.

### **Conclusion : Contesting Representations**

Uighurs and other minorities in China are fully aware of the use the State is making of their identities in both international relations and the construction of national identity, which allows for the justification of internal control over not only individual sexuality, but cultural and political difference as well. Through several protests - I witnessed a Uighur march against a Han exhibition of "minority art" at the Overseas Hotel in Urumqi in Fall 1987, that the Uighur found to be denigrating and degrading - Uighur have often attempted to object to their *National Geographic* - like portrayals as "happy, sensual natives". But in China there is more to it than the *National Geographic* romanticization of the primitive. I would argue that it is because the construction of Han identity is so tenuous, so questionable, and the position of Han superiority is so insecure, that the portrayal of the Other as sensual, immoral, and even, barbarous, becomes so important. This is also why the erotic portrayal of minorities is still permitted in a society which strictly controls any other even slightly pornographic material, not only that of the Han, but also including foreign publications and video media. While every society tends to allow the exoticization and eroticization of the other and the stranger, in China it is an active project of the State itself. It is the internal Other which is appropriated for nation-building and reinforcing the prudish moral code of the totalitarian state. By allowing the continued portrayal of the minorities in state-sponsored media, at the very same time that it restricts such portrayals of Han and foreigners, the state reinforces its hegemonic control over its peoples as well as promoting its notion of civilisation and moral authority. For domestic consumption, minorities - Muslims included - are portrayed as erotic and erotic, but for international purposes, the nationalities - Muslims especially - are represented as traditional and content.

At the same time, Uighur and other minorities are taking advantage of their official minority status, and objectified identities, ill-fitting or not, to promote their own religious, political, and personal interests. Opportunities to study and travel abroad are hard to come by, even for Han, and the Uighur are eager to take advantage of every little crack in the Chinese system. When the state allows those cracks to appear, albeit for very specific foreign policy and economic goals, they may not be able to anticipate the many unintended results - results which might include a strengthened transnational Uighur identity.