

# RESEARCH JOURNAL

## “NO ONE CAN TAKE AWAY WHO WE ARE”

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"**T**his land is our heritage. This land is our home. No one can take away who we are." These were the words of my former student, a young Uighur boy living in Urumqi. The statement arose after I suggested a new discussion topic to the Advanced English class I instructed: Uighur identity in Xinjiang. As I asked one Uighur girl about her views on vanishing Uighur culture, she said, "*Wo keyi yong zhongwen huida ma?*" (Can I answer in Chinese?) "You're Uighur, aren't you?" I asked. "*Shi*" (Yes), she replied—again in Chinese. "Then, can we try to communicate in our *own* language?" As I proposed this new challenge for her, an expression of subtle fear crept across her face. "I'm really bad at Uighur," she said. "I've studied in Chinese schools all my life. I can't speak it."

Since 2002, I have volunteered my summer vacations to teach English to Uighur students in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The region is the homeland of eight million Uighurs, my parents included. The aforementioned conversation with my student took place during my third summer teaching English. By that time, I had observed the profound effect of the influx Han Chinese and the promotion of Mandarin-language education programs on Uighur heritage, culture, and language.

China's northwestern borderland, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, is more than just the nation's largest and most ethnically diverse province. Xinjiang is unique among the regions of Han Chinese-dominated mainland China, despite its loose territorial incorporation into the empire of the Qing dynasty during the late eighteenth century, and full incorporation into the PRC as an autonomous region in 1955. This is primarily due to its large Turkic Muslim population, cultural and historical links to Central Asia, and geographic remoteness from major Han Chinese cities. The Uighur, a Turkic people of the Silk Road oases, have inhabited the region for centuries as the majority among many ethnic groups. In recent years, however, they are gradually becoming a minority as more and more Han Chinese migrate to the area to reap the economic benefits of the PRC's "Develop the West" campaign.<sup>1</sup>

While the migration of Han Chinese to various areas of Xinjiang has brought more infrastructure, development, and investment to the region, the emerging Man-

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<sup>1</sup> The "Develop the West" (*Xibu da kaifa*) campaign began in 2000 and aims to decrease the income and development disparities between large Chinese cities of the East and less-industrialized cities of the West. The campaign has developed infrastructure, encouraged investment, and contributed to Xinjiang's flourishing trade. The expanding job market and incentives given to migrants to Xinjiang have spurred rapid migration of Han Chinese to the minority-dominated province. Despite success in many areas, the ongoing campaign has partially excluded ethnic minorities from the development and investment loop, increasing the income disparity between Han Chinese and the region's ethnic minorities.

darin-oriented job market and extraction of Xinjiang's natural resources give few benefits of the campaign, if any, to Uighurs. Income disparities between Han Chinese and Uighurs continue to increase in the old Silk Road cities of Xinjiang, such as Kashgar and Hotan. **Rapid urbanization of Urumqi has also resulted in the Sinicization** of the city and its people; among Uighur teenagers who have studied in Chinese schools, the inability to read, write, or speak Uighur is a common phenomenon.

There were several reasons behind my decision to begin teaching English in Xinjiang. Having visited Urumqi with my parents every year since childhood, I was interested in interacting with Uighur teenagers of my own age. Although I already spoke fluent Uighur and was familiar with Uighur culture, having never actually lived in Xinjiang, I felt very distant from the region's Uighur population. English-language training was also becoming popular among the Uighurs of Urumqi, and they increasingly sought to learn English in order to survive in the Han Chinese-oriented job market. However, there was a significant lack of fluent English speakers in Xinjiang.

With these factors in mind, I decided to put my Uighur and English skills to use during the summer of 2002 while residing at my relative's house in Ghulja, a northern city near Urumqi. That first summer, at the age of thirteen, I taught English to middle school students. The following summer, I stayed at another relative's apartment. These experiences were very rewarding and turned teaching into a passion for me. For the next four years, I devoted my summers to helping Uighur teenagers develop their knowledge of English.

In 2005, my classroom was located on Yan An Street, which allowed me to observe that the Yan An Street neighborhood<sup>2</sup> was an exception to the trend toward Sinicization seen in other areas of Urumqi. The smell of kebabs and naan, the sound of Turkish music, and loud Uighur conversations from outside often filled the classroom; my students listened to music from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkey rather than from other regions of China; the surrounding streets were filled with newly opened Uighur supermarkets offering customers a full choice of Halal foodstuffs from Turkey and Central Asia; and the Uighur atmosphere and newly constructed apartment complexes on Yan An Street were beginning to attract middle- and upper-class Uighurs and Turkic Central Asian expatriates<sup>3</sup> to the area. I realized that, amidst growing Han Chinese influence in Xinjiang, which confronted Uighurs with serious cultural and social threats to their Turkic heritage, the survival of Uighur culture was taking an unexpected course on Yan An Street. In this traditionally Uighur neighborhood, modern Uighur culture and identity continued to flourish. In fact, the area was becoming a cultural hotspot influenced primarily by the Turkic West rather than the Han Chinese East.

My research on the new expression of Uighur identity was thus informed by

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<sup>2</sup> The area on and around the three connected streets of Shanshihanza, Dongkoruk (Chinese: *Er Dao Qiao*) and Yan An Street compose a neighborhood with a distinctly Uighur atmosphere unique to this area of Urumqi today.

<sup>3</sup> The term "Turkic Central Asian expatriates" refers to merchants hailing from Central Asian republics (Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan) and the Turkic Caucasus (Azerbaijan) that were part of the USSR until 1991. Aside from Tajikistan, all of these nations are considered Turkic, sharing the same ethnic origin and identity. The Uighurs of Xinjiang share ethnic roots with the Turkic people of Central Asia and the Caucasus. These ethnic roots are one cause of the ethnic division between Han Chinese and Uighurs that exists in Xinjiang today.

these initial observations during my stay in 2005. In the summer of 2007, I returned to Yan An Street to conduct interviews and field surveys on the topic of Uighur identity in Urumqi. Through my research, I observed the many economic and social forces of globalization currently aiding the survival of Uighur culture. Opened borders, unrestricted trade, and increased cultural exchange connect Uighurs to Turkic peoples of the West and offer them new consumption choices for Turkic products. The growing economic and cultural interactions between the Uighurs of Xinjiang and the Turkic peoples of Central Asia are what keep Uighur Turkic identity strong.

My field research focused on examining consumer culture in relation to Uighur cultural identity in the vicinity of Yan An Street and two connected streets, Shanshihanza and Dongkoruk. Through field surveys, I examined various aspects of Uighur consumer culture, including music, foodstuffs, daily goods, and real estate, and observed that the Yan An Street neighborhood’s vibrant Uighur consumer culture is what attracts Urumqi’s Turkic minority groups to the area. Many Uighur supermarket chains such as Arman and Ihlas are present on the main avenues, offering Turkish pastries, frozen Uighur foodstuffs, and even Halal “cup Uighur noodles,” all of which are difficult to find in Chinese markets.

My research also included interviews of Yan An Street music store owners, many of whom stated that Uzbek music was the most popular among local Uighurs, followed by Uighur music from Kazakhstan and Turkish music. Both local consumers and sellers attributed the popularity of Uzbek music to its closeness to Uighur music, as well as Uzbek’s linguistic similarity to Uighur.<sup>4</sup> This popularity is on full display in the large selection of CDs and VCDs of Uzbek singers available in the music stores. While this reflects the strong influence of Central Asian music in Uighur entertainment culture, the trend is tempered by the growing popularity among young people of Uighur performers singing in Mandarin to Uighur-style music. These singers symbolize the current social expectation for young Uighurs to be fluent in Mandarin and also proud to be Uighur.

A real estate agent I interviewed specified that there are two areas of real estate within the capital city of Urumqi: the “ethnic area” and the “Han area.” Many residents of the “ethnic area,” or what the locals call the milli area, listed its live music, lively crowds, and cosmopolitan nature—aspects seen as undesirable just a few years ago—as the biggest reasons why they had moved to the neighborhood. The real estate agent also attributed Yan An Street’s draw among Uighurs and Central Asian merchants to its well-established Uighur consumer culture, the high ratio of minority residents, and the area’s proximity to schools with large Uighur student and faculty populations, including Xinjiang University. The growing popularity of the area and an overall rise in real estate prices across Urumqi has resulted in a tripling of Yan An Street’s real estate during the period from 2003 to 2007.

At the same time, the greater presence of Central Asian expatriates on Yan An Street has made Russian—following Uighur and Mandarin—a major language of

<sup>4</sup> The Turkic language group is a Ural-Altai language group that encompasses many native tongues of the Turkic people. Many of these languages are similar, and some can be mutually intelligible. Uighur and Uzbek, or Kazakh and Kyrgyz, for example, are often generalized as very similar and mutually intelligible.

the neighborhood.<sup>5</sup> This is exemplified on the faces of the numerous signs written in Uighur, Mandarin, and Russian. Thus, the presence of Russian- and Turkic-speaking Central Asian merchants has contributed to both the Uighur and Turkic character of the area as a whole.

Overall, my field surveys allowed me to view the neighborhood of Shan-shihanza, Dongkoruk, and Yan An Street—an area with which I was already well acquainted—from a fresh perspective. My research suggests that, despite the growing influence of Han Chinese culture, the economic and social forces of globalization have empowered the Uighurs of Urumqi with new ways to express and preserve their Turkic identity. Additionally, the evolving economic and cultural interdependencies between the Uighurs of Xinjiang and Turkic peoples to the West have shifted efforts to preserve Uighur identity away from political and violent means toward cultural and economic means. It is my sincere hope that this growing regional interaction will continue to foster understanding, respect, and communication between all the ethnic groups converging in Xinjiang: Central Asian, Uighur, and Han Chinese alike.

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<sup>5</sup> Many people, if not all, from Central Asian Republics and Caucuses speak Russian (a non-Turkic language) due to its previous inclusion in the USSR.