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FOREIGN DESK

Urumqi Journal; On Old Silk Road, Condos, Mosques and Ethnic Tensions

By **HOWARD W. FRENCH (NYT)** 986 words

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On a big public square dominated by this city's huge gold-domed theater, taxis honk their way through slushy, chaotic streets, stopping to take on passengers laden with bundles of walnuts, almonds, dates and dried plums purchased at open stalls.

Others disembark to pray at one of a score of mosques that dot the inner city, walking past vendors' tables displaying DVD's with Arabic titles about the Persian Gulf war of 1991.

The sidewalk diners at a nearby restaurant, biting away at heavily spiced skewers of lamb kebab and tucking into bowls of meaty stew, seem as though they could have been chosen by casually throwing darts at a map of Asia.

There are alluringly dressed women with black hair, fair skin and striking blue eyes who look passably Russian. There are men with heavily lined, tea-colored faces and brush-thick mustaches who resemble Afghans. There are Turkish-looking Uighurs in Muslim skullcaps and robes and mid-length beards.

Most are probably Chinese, though -- no less than members of the ethnic Chinese majority known as the Han, some of whom, looking businesslike, are filing into a pedestrian underpass nearby.

"You've got to be able to speak a little bit of a lot of languages in this work," said Ahat Imam, a burly, dark-skinned man who operates a bank of telephones on the sidewalk, where people call places throughout China as well as the farthest corners of Central Asia. "I can speak Uighur, a little Kazakh, a little Uzbek. And when I see a customer, right away I can tell what ethnic group he is from."

To visit a city like this, the capital of China's far western region of Xinjiang, is to be powerfully reminded that this country is very much a work in progress, a place where the center does not always hold.

Xinjiang's independence movements enjoy little of the sympathy in the West that neighboring Tibet receives. But this remote region, nearly as far from Beijing as California is from Washington -- along with Hong Kong and, some would add, Taiwan -- is every bit as much a part of forces that are tearing at this country, much as the former Soviet Union was sundered and as China has been divided in the past.

China is hastily redeveloping this frontier capital. Sparkling office buildings and high-rise condos now rise from streets that were dominated only a decade ago by blocky, artless compounds dating from the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76.

The rise of a new Urumqi (pronounced oo-ROOM-chee), though, has barely papered over the ethnic and religious cracks that run deep in this region, which sits astride the ancient Silk Road. Islam reigned here for 1,000 years, but it is under heavy pressure from ethnic Chinese migration, breakneck development and heavy-handed repression.

In today's Xinjiang, money, authority, power -- and, many Uighurs say, hope too -- are all firmly in the grasp of the ethnic Chinese,

who arrive from poorer areas of the country by the thousands every day to seek their fortunes.

The restive Uighurs, a Central Asian ethnic group common to this part of China and to the neighboring former Soviet republics, are becoming an increasingly voiceless minority in their own homeland.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks in the United States, China has justified many of its policies in Xinjiang as part of its own war on terror. Indeed, the Bush administration has added Uighur separatist groups to its lists of international terrorist organizations. But the campaign of repression here, international human rights experts say, has far older roots.

Scores of mosques have been razed and Uighur literature burned. There have been forced "re-education" campaigns of local religious leaders, many arrests of people suspected of being separatists, and numerous executions.

This region twice briefly enjoyed independence from China in the 1930's and 1940's. Its dream of self-determination was rekindled by the end of the Soviet Union, when ethnic kinsmen in neighboring republics, like Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, were given independence.

Uighur demonstrations were put down with increasing ferocity by the government, prompting ever bolder actions by pro-independence groups.

The government has heavily reinforced security throughout the province, reportedly installing hidden cameras inside mosques and stepping up its surveillance of students and others. Koranic schools have been closed, and civil servants, teachers and students have reportedly been forbidden to pray in public.

Mickey Spiegel, a China expert at Human Rights Watch in New York, said it was known that people had been jailed for separatist activities. "The number of executions is not known," she said. "I must say that the information that is coming out of Xinjiang is tighter than it has ever been."

Understandably, people in Urumqi speak guardedly with strangers. "We give religious education to our children at home," said Wang Yanqing, 53, a watchman at a blue-tile-roofed Qing Dynasty mosque. "Islam is not available in schools."

In one almost entirely Uighur neighborhood near the center of town, on a frigid morning this week, Islamic music rang out from an unseen sound box, and a cluster of men danced playfully on a terrace.

Down the street, Tohti Hapiz, a Uighur blacksmith, pulled red-hot iron bars from a crude street furnace and beat them into meat cleavers with the help of two apprentices. He said each would sell for about a dollar.

Mr. Hapiz paused in reflection when asked what Urumqi would be like in 20 years. "Uighurs don't have much to do here, besides standing, smoking cigarettes, drinking and selling things," he answered. "We are as clever as the Han, but more and more this is becoming their city. Meanwhile, the prisons are full of Uighurs."

Photos: In Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, Uighur peddlers sold their wares at the Erdaoqiao Market, above. Below, a Uighur neighborhood is slowly being destroyed for high-rise towers mostly for ethnic Chinese migrants. (Photographs by Stuart Isett/Polaris, for The New York Times)

Maps of Xinjiang, China, highlighting Urumqi.