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Throngs of migrants flooding China's ancient Silk Road cities

By Tim Johnson
Knight Ridder Newspapers

URUMQI, China - Every morning, the trains that pull into the old Silk Road cities of China's Wild West disgorge torrents of migrants toting bulging plastic bags and dreams of a new future.

Not so long ago, they would have stood out. Xinjiang province is populated by Muslim Uighurs, blue-eyed Kazakhs, Persian-looking Tajiks and more than a dozen other ethnic minority groups. Barely a smattering of Han Chinese, who make up the vast majority of the country's population, lived here.

But after years of a state-sponsored "Go West!" campaign, Han migrants from eastern China are overwhelming the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. The province is on the cusp of looking like the rest of China, its unusual multi-hued ethnic identity diluted forever.

The most recent census, in 2002, found Han Chinese making up about 40 percent of Xinjiang's 21 million people. Many residents, though, think the Han have grown to a majority, even above the native Uighurs (pronounced Weegers), whom the census puts at 46 percent. The Han population in Xinjiang is rising at double the pace of any ethnic minority.

IMAGES

The Koran Scripture Institute in Urumqi, Xiangjiang, China. RICKY WONG, KRT

French supermarket Carrefour & American KFC are seen in the Xinjiang International Grand Bazaar, a tourist spot in Urumqi, Xiangjiang, China. RICKY WONG, KRT

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When communist China was founded in 1949, Xinjiang's Han Chinese made up 6 percent of the population, while Uighurs were about 75 percent.

The immigrants flooding Xinjiang, which means "new frontier," largely stick to themselves, wary of their ethnic brethren.

"We cannot communicate with them. We don't know their language," said Zhang Bizhong, a construction worker from

Sichuan province. "We Sichuanese prefer to eat rice and pork, and dishes with strong flavors. The local minorities don't eat pork. They don't like rice."

An eight-day trip around Xinjiang, which looped through Hami, a former Silk Road desert oasis near the border with Mongolia, all the way to Kashgar, a distant Uighur outpost along the Karakorum Highway near Pakistan, underscored the transformation of the region, which sprawls over a sixth of China's landmass.

Earthmovers are ramming down the mud-brick houses in desert oases, making way for the sterile white-tile commercial buildings that investors from coastal China are throwing up.

In Turpan, a desert town near the Flaming Mountains, donkey carts ply the central market. Uighur merchants wearing skullcaps sell prayer rugs. Ululating music wafts through the air. Chinese-speaking migrant women in miniskirts, cell phones in hand, jostle with local women in Muslim head scarves.

From a stall stocked with ornate daggers, Tuhuti Ku'erban said Uighurs such as he might not like the influx of Han Chinese, but saw no use in protesting to the all-powerful ruling Communist Party.

"We can't speak out. If we did, what difference would it make?" Ku'erban said.

On a cool evening at the main square in Hami, retired teacher Li Defeng, a Han who emigrated from central Henan province, surveyed those viewing an outdoor dance show and said: "There are very few natives here. Everyone is from somewhere else."

Farther west, one sees more of Xinjiang's ethnic mix. Some minorities have Central Asian and Mediterranean features, including sandy hair and light-colored eyes. Languages are also different. Tajiks speak a form of Persian, while Uighurs, Kyrgyz and Kazakhs speak Turkic languages.

A senior Communist Party official in Xinjiang, Wang Lequan, who's also a Politburo member, said in a meeting with foreign reporters that migrant laborers filled a void. Many Xinjiang minorities don't want the "dirty, hard and tiring work," he said.

Noting that about 1 million migrant laborers pour into Xinjiang each summer to harvest cotton and tomatoes, Wang said some decided on their own to stay. He denied that Beijing was attempting to dilute the ethnic population to gain better control of the region. A government-supported migration to Tibet similarly has changed the population mix there.

"The reality is that the Han Chinese bosses are reluctant to hire Uighurs. They have the stereotype that they are lazy, recalcitrant and speak poor Chinese," said Dru Gladney, an expert on Xinjiang at the University of Hawaii.

China's leaders long have feared that regional separatist efforts, such as those of the Uighurs or the Tibetans, could cause the country to fragment. That fear intensified in the 1990s, when Uighur radicals carried out more than 100 bombings and assassinations. Security forces cracked down. Thousands were sent to forced labor camps, and perhaps hundreds to the firing squad.

Today, Han Chinese control the top party and military posts in the province, tightly monitoring Muslim religious activity and slamming the lid on any outbreak of social discontent.

Meanwhile, authorities aren't slowing migration, if the Urumqi train station is any indication.

"I'm going back to my hometown to bring more people here," said Liu Zishi, a 36-year-old cotton picker from neighboring Gansu province, a suitcase beside him. His foreman pays a commission for each migrant worker he brings back.

Xinjiang's grasslands and deserts are rich in resources. The huge area, which borders eight countries, holds oil and gas

deposits, coal, minerals, vast cotton plantations and fruit orchards.

An economic boom is apparent in Urumqi, a city of 2.1 million people with new high rises built by coastal investors and cranes on the horizon building more.

"If you go to Kazakhstan and come back after one month, you see the changes," said Mansur Muldakoolov, a financial manager of a Kazakh-owned fruit juice company.

Xinjiang's economy outpaces the growth of nearly all the rest of China, even though it's far from the industrialized east. Annual per capita income is $1,300; it's $1,010 a year for the country as a whole.

"We are very proud of this," said He Yiming, deputy party secretary in Urumqi.

All isn't equal, however. An income gap falls along ethnic lines. Han Chinese workers earn more, and many non-Han workers can't find jobs.

Like much in Xinjiang, Han Chinese and their ethnic counterparts offer vastly different narratives about culture, daily life and even history.

Han Chinese see the region as an integral part of China from time immemorial. Minorities note that Xinjiang wasn't under Chinese control until the late 19th century and twice saw the rise of the short-lived East Turkestan Republic in the 1930s and 1940s before falling under the control of communist China in 1949.

While Han Chinese view the development of Xinjiang with pride, some minorities feel marginalized by it, seeing it as a symbol of humiliation.

Party officials say they see only ethnic unity in the region.

"We live together harmoniously," said Bai Zhijie, the Communist Party secretary in Hami prefecture, reciting the "three inseparables" party dictate: "The Han people cannot be separated from ethnic people. Ethnic people cannot be separated from Han people. And the ethnic groups cannot be separated from one another."

Han penetration of Xinjiang is evident even in Kashgar, the oasis near Kyrgyzstan that's the cultural heartland of the Uighurs. A railway line opened up Kashgar to immigrants in 1999.

All around the central Idh Kah Mosque, which dates to 1442, bulldozers are razing ancient buildings. Coastal investors are constructing modern shopping centers in faux-Islamic style.

"If you go to the southern part of the city, it is almost all Han Chinese," said Gladney, the scholar.

The two sides of the city see eye to eye on very little, including the time of day. Government officials keep the clock on the same time as Beijing, a continent away to the east. Locals set the clock back two hours.