

WEDNESDAY, 14 AUGUST 2002

UYGHUR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE UNDER THREAT IN XINJIANG

Published in Analytical
Articles

Rate this item  (1 Vote)

By Michael Dillon (8/14/2002 issue of the CACI Analyst)

BACKGROUND: Uyghur, the language of the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, is a Turkic language closely related to Uzbek and less closely to Kazakh and Kyrgyz. It is written in a modified Arabic script which helps to identify its speakers as Muslims, although a Latin script also exists and was used during the 1970s and 1980s. It has been the main language of instruction in many schools in Xinjiang alongside Chinese which has increasingly become predominant.

BACKGROUND: Uyghur, the language of the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, is a Turkic language closely related to Uzbek and less closely to Kazakh and Kyrgyz. It is written in a modified Arabic script which helps to identify its speakers as Muslims, although a Latin script also exists and was used during the 1970s and 1980s. It has been the main language of instruction in many schools in Xinjiang alongside Chinese which has increasingly become predominant. Uyghur and Chinese are not related in any way and Uyghurs have to learn Chinese as a foreign language. In the region's main university, Xinjiang University, Uyghur and Chinese were both used as languages of instruction until a government decision in May 2002 decreed that the vast majority of courses would be taught only in Chinese. Uyghur students have for many years had to make the difficult decision of whether to study in Chinese or their own language but this ruling deprives them even of that choice. The university authorities argue that there are no suitable text books in Uyghur, especially for science courses, and that it is vital for all students in Xinjiang to be able to operate in Chinese to a high level, whatever their ethnic origin, but the ruling will be seen by many Uyghurs as an attack on their culture by the Han Chinese who are still a minority in Xinjiang. Reports of the burning of books written in Uyghur have come from a number of different sources. In June 2002, the Kashghar Uyghur Press is reported to have burned copies of *A Brief History of the Huns and Ancient Uyghur Literature*, books by Turghun Almas who died last year and which had previously been banned because they were considered to support separatist ideas. Many copies of *Ancient Uyghur Craftsmanship* which describes local crafts including silk weaving, carpet making and carpentry were also destroyed. Censorship of other books was stepped up and the publication of many other volumes was cancelled. During June, similar books were confiscated from the official Xinhua bookshops, from school and college libraries and even from individual schoolchildren and students in all the counties of Kashghar Prefecture. Eyewitnesses reported that books collected from No. 1 Secondary School in Kashghar City were piled up and burned.

IMPLICATIONS: The destruction of these books is part of an ideological campaign being waged against separatism by the Chinese authorities. At political meetings in Kashghar in June, hundreds of activists were briefed and trained before being sent out to villages and schools throughout the region. Book burning and propaganda meetings took place in the counties of Maralbashi, Yengisar, Karghalik and Yopurga and the towns of Yarkant and Payzawat as well as Kashghar. Schoolchildren were brought in to classrooms even though the summer holidays had started and other activities were abandoned to make time for political meetings. Booklets, pamphlets and audio tapes produced by the government and denouncing separatism and illegal religious activities were distributed in huge numbers. Wang Lequan, Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party's Xinjiang regional committee, and the most powerful political figure in Xinjiang, was interviewed by Chinese journalists on June 23rd and made it clear that ideological and educational work was a high priority in the battle against separatism. Punishing those who had committed violent crimes was at the top of his agenda, but he stressed the need to educate the local population so that they understood better how separatists were distorting the history of Xinjiang. He said that hundreds of party and government officials had been sent out to rural Xinjiang in 'work groups' to publicize government policy, and a propaganda campaign was being waged in schools and in religious organisations. The campaign against separatism has been waged by the Chinese authorities since the early 1990s but has been given added impetus by China's support for the USA-led war against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. China hopes that this support will reduce the criticism it has received from human rights organisations over its policies on minority languages and culture in Xinjiang. In the past, China has identified underground Islamic organisations and political groups inspired by the short-lived East Turkestan Republic of the 1940s as the greatest threat to its hold over Xinjiang. The current campaign is directed against something even more fundamental to the identity of the Uyghurs, their spoken and written language.

CONCLUSIONS: Under the cover of the "war against terrorism" Beijing has been gradually stepping up the rhetoric against separatists in Xinjiang. The Strike Hard campaign that was launched in 1996 to root out underground criminal, political and religious organisations continues unabated and has succeeded in limiting the number of demonstrations against Chinese rule and the number of armed attacks by Uyghur separatists on the symbols of Beijing's authority in the region. The Strike Hard campaign was re-launched in April 2001 and regional and provincial authorities were instructed to pay particular attention to illegal religious activities, in other words those conducted by organisations not registered with the Chinese state. The number of death sentences and actual executions in Xinjiang has increased in this period, although it is difficult to distinguish executions for separatist activities from those imposed for crimes, due to the way they are reported. The attack on Uyghur language and culture is all the more threatening because of the general climate of repression. The latest campaign affects all Uyghurs, not solely the militants, and carries the message that using the Uyghur language is a sign of disloyalty, if not an indication of support for terrorism. Repression on this scale may temporarily succeed in subduing the expression of ethnic identity but in the long-term it can only increase the resentment that Uyghurs feel towards their Chinese masters and fuel deeper conflict in the future.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Dr. Michael Dillon is Director of the Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies at the University of Durham, UK.

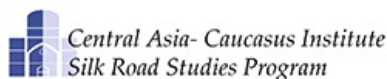
Copyright 2001 *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*. All rights reserved

Read 8619 times

More in this category:

« KYRGYZ GOVERNMENT UNABLE TO PRODUCE NEW NATIONAL IDEOLOGY

CHINA'S DEFEATS IN CENTRAL ASIA »



JOINT CENTER PUBLICATIONS

Silk Road Paper Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: A New Spring*, November 2018.

Book S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, ed., *Uzbekistan's New Face*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Article Svante E. Cornell, "Turkish-Saudi Rivalry: Behind the Khashoggi Affair," *The American Interest*, November 6, 2018.

Article Mamuka Tsereteli, "Landmark Caspian Deal Could Pave Way for Long-Stalled Energy Projects," *World Politics Review*, September 2018.

Article Halil Karaveli, "The Myth of Erdoğan's Power," *Foreign Affairs*, August 2018.

Book Halil Karaveli, *Why Turkey is Authoritarian*, London: Pluto Press, 2018.

Article Svante E. Cornell, "Erbakan, Kısakürek and the Mainstreaming of Extremism in Turkey," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, June 2018.

Article S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, "Uzbekistan: A New Model for Reform in the Muslim World," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 12, 2018.

Silk Road Paper Svante E. Cornell, *Religion and the Secular State in Kazakhstan*, April 2018.

Book S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *The Long Game on the Silk Road: US and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Article Svante E. Cornell, "Central Asia: Where Did Islamic Radicalization Go?," *Religion, Conflict and Stability in the Former Soviet Union*, eds Katya Migacheva and Bryan Frederick, Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2018.

The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst is a biweekly publication of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, a Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center affiliated with the American Foreign Policy Council, Washington DC., and the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm. For 15 years, the Analyst has brought cutting edge analysis of the region geared toward a practitioner audience.

ARTICLE TAGS

Afghanistan Armenia Azerbaijan

Central Asia China Georgia Iran

Kazakhstan Kyrgyzstan **Russia**

South Caucasus Tajikistan Turkey United States

Uzbekistan

NEWSLETTER

Sign up for upcoming events, latest

news and articles from the CACI

Analyst

[Newsletter](#)

[Analytical](#)

► [UYGHUR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE UNDER THREAT IN](#)

[Publications](#) ► [Articles](#)

[XINJIANG](#)

Copyright © 2020 CACI Analyst. All Rights Reserved.

The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center