

Bellér-Hann, Ildikó, M.Cristina Cesàro, Rachel Harris, and Joanne Smith Finley (eds.) :
Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia . (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007),
xxv+249 pp., \$99.95 ISBN 978-0-7546-7041-4

When an ethnic group and its culture is caught in the process of being forcefully transformed and finally eradicated - in Xinjiang this applies to all ethnic minorities - it is difficult not to talk about this basic all-underlying situation. In my humble perception, Uyghur society will be phased out by Chinese and global influences and inner contradictions including radical Islamism by around 2050 if the trends of development discernible for the last 60 years continue without interruption. The political strategy of the so-called Communist Party and the leading echelons of the state to squelch and destroy the minority cultures and to impose their own culture and rule upon the indigenous people and their land is certainly never expressed in plain words. The brutal never describes himself as brutal. The strategy is more of a mute script. There are two texts, one superimposed on top of the other: the well sounding mendaciously uttered official text (of official propaganda, proclamations, scientific publications...) always covers up the second, the mute text. If we are not struck with blindness, we can recognize, and in fact, we do recognize this mute text in the totality of the political, economic, cultural and social activity forced upon the Uyghurs and the other non-Han peoples of Xinjiang. If this is so, can the ethnographer/anthropologist afford not to speak out about this basic fact and confine himself/herself to describing some remnant flourishings of culture (and history)? Yes he/she can - the volume under review with its 'fresh insights' proves it.

It is the intention of the four editors of the volume at hand *not* to show the Uyghurs as a

suffering ethnic group: “The Uyghur condition in contemporary Xinjiang should [sic!] not be conceived as one of an enclosed state of victimhood” (p. 240, Conclusion). The editors address the “false” tendency supposedly prevalent in Xinjiang studies in recent decades which “has been dominated by political sciences and revolves around the model of ‘the powerful state vs. the oppressed minority group’” (ibid.). In opposition to this model, the editorial group claims a state of normalcy for the ongoing process of brutal colonization: in the words of the editors we find “complex lived realities in a region long subjected to multiple and sometimes conflicting socio-cultural influences” (p. 240). The techniques and strategies of territorial control, occupation of resources, of water and land, systematic demographic change and birth planning, the role of industrialization and resource appropriation monopolized by the Han, and the all-pervading terror of the institutional establishment (army, police, secret services, party and government, universities and research institutions) constitute the framework for this “cleaner” cultural world and the facets of this world upon which the monograph focuses.

Accordingly, the description of the existing tensions in Xinjiang is confined to one page (p. 3, Introduction) under the astonishing caption “The Uyghur Problem”. It seems as if the editors are blaming the Uyghurs for constituting the “problem” for occasioning the ever expanding influence of the Chinese Leviathan, and not vice versa? So much for the opportunistic framework. The selection of more or less colorful cultural and the occasional historical topics for this anthology follows logically from this framework.

Each of the twelve scientists who have contributed to the volume does so from his or her own specific experience and field of interest. Each of the articles has its own weight and value and opens up a small facet of reality. The articles remain mutually unrelated. For reasons of space I can only mention some of them:

Edmund Waite's article (pp. 165-188) focuses on reformist tendencies among Islamic institutions concerning the *nāzir* (i.e. un-islamic, Central Asian rituals carried out in favor of the deceased). Here Islamic groups are partly joining hands with restrictive policies of the government.

Michael Friedrich writes about the representation of Xinjiang realities in the form of contemporary poetry (pp.89-107). It is difficult to present a picture of the personal intentions of the authors and the social functions of Uyghur poetry in the time span between 1980 and 2000. Friedrich does not elaborate on the schismatic relationships between the (sometimes strict, sometimes slackened) state censorship, internalized censorship, state sponsored poetry, and the remaining freedom of public expression in all its intricacies.

The contribution by Joanne Smith Finley (pp. 219-237) describes the situation of the *minkaohan*-Uyghurs, i.e. those Uyghurs who visit a Chinese school with Chinese teachers, Chinese schoolmates and the Chinese language as class-room language by way of a narrative about a female Uyghur friend (who is a *minkaohan*) and her daughter (who is not). This article goes into the lived realities.

Two Uyghur authors from Xinjiang have contributed to the volume: Rahilä Dawut with an article about the recent transformation of holy *mazars* into touristic sites, run like capitalist enterprises under the auspices of market society (pp. 149-164). Äsäd Sulayman (pp. 109-127) discusses the lack of family names in Uyghur society and a semi-official proposal, how this problem could be solved.

Nathan Light (pp.49-68) provides some insight into the contents of his voluminous ethno-musicological work about the *muqam* tradition (the complete oeuvre has by now appeared as *Intimate heritage. Creating Uyghur Muqam Song in Xinjiang*, Berlin 2008, Lit-Verlag).

Rachel Harris contributes a second article about the various local expressions and the history of the *muqam* tradition and its relationship with the Arab and Central Asian context (pp.69-88).

The thematic orientation of the monograph to locate the Uyghurs on a cultural (historical and political) axis *between* China in the East and Central Asia in the North and West is supposed to serve as a bracket to hold the twelve quite diverse articles together. But does this not beg the question whether the Uyghurs are not Central Asians themselves? - Under this interpretation, influences from the Arab, Iranian, Mongol, Tibetan and the Siberian world, influences coming from Turkey and the Indian sub-continent, Russian and global influences become neglected. Uyghurs themselves might reject the idea of their *in-betweenness* expounded in this volume.

A comprehensive introduction into ethnography and culture of present day Uyghur society has not been intended. The monograph speaks to the specialist equipped with a developed knowledge of the region, not to a general readership interested in Central Asian peoples or the Uyghurs. To give an example: no population figure is presented for the Uyghurs living inside or outside the Chinese territory. No map indicates the geographical distribution of the Uyghurs living in Central Asia and China. And related to this, none of the articles elaborate on the co-existence, cultural contacts and confrontations of local Uyghur populations with other ethnic groups, for example, with the Xibe, Hui and Kazakhs (and Han) in Ili, with the Mongols, Kazakhs and Tuwinians

(and Han and Hui) in the Altay, or with the state-farms run by the Han (and Hui).

Regional differences within Uyghur society as well as class distinctions are left beyond the scope of this collection entirely.

The constrained refusal of this volume to even consider the social environment of the Uyghurs leaves the enlightened reader with a strange after-taste. In a recently published interview Rem Koolhaas who is productively cooperating with the Chinese in the field of architecture said that our critical European or Western attitudes cannot hold out for long. Quite a similar mind-set has been operative here.

Bremen (July 2008)

Thomas Hoppe