

## Self-acknowledgement at Sea—Identities of Xinjiang’s Minority Groups

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### Abstract

There are 55 ethnic groups living in Xinjiang -- a place of clash of civilizations. Based on limited literature and resources, this article tries to discuss identities of three main minority groups in Xinjiang: Uyghur, Kazak, and Dungan. They have different degrees of identities, which means they are struggling painfully.

**Keywords:** identity, Xinjiang, Uyghur, Kazak, Dungan

### 1. Background

Xinjiang – meaning *the new boarder* in Chinese, is one of the most ethnically and culturally diversified area in the world, which reveals that it fits the famous concept proposed by Samuel P. Huntington: the clash of civilizations. Given that religion and culture are basic elements of identity, all cultures and sub-cultures that have influenced this area in history– the Islamic, the Christian, the Confucian, the Buddhist, the Orthodox, the Persian, make identities of ethnic groups in Xinjiang extremely ambiguous and complex. Furthermore, due to the high sensitivity of related topics, and there is always a time lag of latest political science studies in China (ethnicity studies was introduced in china in the 1990s), researches and literatures are far from enough. Moreover, Chinese scholars were not aware of the necessity of related studies until the July 2009 Urumqi Riots. Thus, based on limited literatures, this article simply provides an overall picture of identities of minority groups in Xinjiang.

In 60 BC, the central government has set *the Protectorate of the Western Regions* as an imperial administration to show its symbolic prestige and sovereignty to small states in this area. Not until the middle of 18<sup>th</sup> century has this area become the de facto territory of the empire. Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region was established in 1955, and 13 native ethnic groups were officially recognized in that year. Due mainly to the population mobility, now there are 55 ethnic groups in Xinjiang.

**Table 1: Population of minority groups in Xinjiang (thousand people)**

Year	Total population	Minority groups	Percentage
1990	15,292	9,450	61.80
2000	18,494	11,243	60.79
2010	21,816	12,986	59.53

Source: <http://www.xjtj.gov.cn/>

**Table 2: Population of main ethnic groups in Xinjiang (thousand people)**

Year	Han	Percentage	Uyghur	Percent age	Kazak	Percent age	Dungan	Percentage
1990	5,842	38.20	7,250	47.41	1,161	7.59	703	4.60
2000	7,251	39.21	8,523	46.09	1,319	7.13	839	4.54
2010	8,830	40.47	10,000	45.84	1,418	6.50	983	4.51

Source: <http://www.xjtj.gov.cn/>

Until 2010, with a total population of 2.2 million, the population of Uyghur, Kazak, Dungan is 10 million, 1.41 million, 0.98 million respectively. Together they account for 95.51% of total population of minority groups in Xinjiang. Therefore, these three ethnic groups are essential to understand minority identities in Xinjiang.

To discuss identities of these three minority groups, the concept of *nation* needs to be clarified. However, due to China is an “imitative” nation-state (Zhou, 2018), or in other words, the concept of nation did not exist in Chinese history, it always causes confusions and ambiguity.

Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the core concept of identity in China is “what exists under the haven (Tianxia)”, it “shows the self-acknowledgement of Chinese identity”, and “lacks a type of clashing relationship with others” (Lippiello, 2013). Apparently, this concept was applied in interact between Han Chinese and native groups in Xinjiang from the very beginning.

In 1905, Liang has introduced the term “nation” for the first time. But in his article, the concept was split into two parts: the big nation – Chinese nation as a whole, and small nations, i.e., Han and others. For the first time, nationalism came into China. This ideological concept was introduced to build a modern nation-state, but it also awakened self-acknowledgement of identities of small ethnic groups. In 1912, with the establishment of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen put forward the slogan “five races under one union”, including Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Hui, and Tibetan. At that time, Hui refers to all Muslim minorities mainly living in the west. After the foundation of People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party adopted Stalin’s theory of nation, and officially announced that there are 56 nations in China. However, they have abandoned the idea of autonomous republic, out of concern that the Outer Mongolia would set a bad example for the rest minority groups.

Now nationalism is undoubtedly widely accepted in China. Since the conflicts between “the big nation” and “small nations”, and the monopoly of “state discourse” (Zhang, 2004), Chinese scholars turn the phrase “ethnic groups” into “nations” when they use theories of ethnicity studies<sup>1</sup>. Out of the same reason, identity studies in Xinjiang is mainly focused on conflicts between national identity and civic (state)<sup>2</sup> identity, interestingly leading to two completely different results occasionally: some find a strong civic identity (Li, 2016), while others hold the opposite opinion (Zhao, 2017), which will be discussed later.

## **2. Identities of Dungan**

### **2.1. Identities in History**

The official name of Dungan – Hui, is ambiguous from the very beginning. In history, sometimes it refers to ethnic groups in the west, sometimes it refers to all Muslims. As a group whose origin is quite controversial, similar ambiguity also exists in their self-acknowledgement of identities in history. In general, the development of their identities has experienced two stages: from self-being to self-awareness (Fei, 2013).

**a. Tang Dynasty and Song Dynasty (618– 1279).** As Dungan historian Bai (1957) indicates, the first and the main origin of Dungan are Persians, Arabians, and ethnic groups from Central Asia. In Tang Dynasty, the ancestors of Dungan came to southeast China along the Maritime Silk Road, mainly living in Guangzhou, Quanzhou, and Yangzhou. The Central government conducted a tolerant policy: building mosques in their communities, and allowing them to self-manage. In Song Dynasty, the central government encouraged trade. As a result, a lot of them have settled down as businessmen, farmers, or even government officials. During this period, the population kept growing constantly, and their Islamic culture was gradually accepted by the society.

**b. Yuan Dynasty (1271 – 1368).** In the Mongolia Empire, because of three expedition towards western regions, a large number of Muslim soldiers, craftsmen, businessmen, officials, scholars, and missionaries from Central and West Asia were forced to join the Mongolian army. They are recognized as the second-class citizen (only after Mongolians) by Mongolian government and had quite a lot privileges. In nearly 100 years, over 50 Dungans held important positions in the central government, including prime minister, deputy prime minister, etc. During the whole Yuan Dynasty, they were spreading all around China, and their self-acknowledgement of identities was becoming clear gradually by communicating with Han people. Meanwhile, because of their scattered communities, they were inevitably influenced by Han culture, and trying to internalize Confucianism but not at the price of losing Islamic quality.

**c. Ming Dynasty (1368 -- 1644).** The Ming government used a “carrot and stick” policy. On the one hand, the authority protected Islam and showed respect to Dungan’s religion. The famous imam Erqi was even employed by the Imperial Academy to translate Islamic classics. On the other hand, however, national assimilation policy was preferred by the authority. Marriage within the group or even with Mongolian was prohibited. Out of concern of losing identities, Dungan elites finally found out a solution: dualistic loyalty. They have combined Islamic values with Confucian values, claiming that Dungans should be loyal to both emperor and Allah, and the final loyalty is for Allah. It is every Dungan’s religious task at the social level. In practice, Dungan would pray for the emperor and the empire before daily prayer in mosque. So far, the civic identity of Dungan was established.

In the end of Ming Dynasty, a more profound religious reform has promoted the localization of Dungan. It was the result of the identity as the “familiar strangers” to the Confucian society (Sha, 2015). Dungan elites initiated the movement called “annotation of Islamic classics by Confucianism”. Islamic scholar Wang (1584 - 1670) called for “annotating classics by language of the middle kingdom”. This movement is treated as a milestone of self-awareness of Dungan’s identities. Another result of this movement was that Dungans gradually accept Chinese as their first language, only a few words of Arabic and Persian have been preserved till now.

<sup>1</sup> In this context, the phrase “ethnic group” has the same meaning of “nations” in this article.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, “civic identity” refers to self-acknowledgement as a citizen of China.

**d. Qing Dynasty (1644 -- 1912).** This period could be divided into two parts. In the rising period of the empire, the authority conducted a relatively tolerant policy. Although some local governors held the opinion of “Han or barbarians”, the central government knew how to handle conflicts properly. Nevertheless, the Dungan society was changing fast and split into different religious sects. Due to ignorance arrogance, local governments often dealt with conflicts between sects indiscreetly, which perniciously intensified contradictions between Dungans and the authority.

The turning point is the Dungan Revolt in 1781 and 1784. After successful suppression, all Dungans were seen as aggressive. And Qing government adopted a suppressive policy. In the law system, the punishment for Dungans was much harsher than Han Chinese. During this period, the population of Dungan decreased quickly, and their national identity has become stronger.

**e. Republic of China (1912 -- 1949).** During this period, as the introduction of nationalism from Europe, and the “five races under one union” policy, Dungans started to swing between nation identity and civic identity, only a few of them accepted the modern idea that Dungan is a nation. Sun (1939) said that Dungan is not a nation, since “only a few of our ancestors are Persians and Arabians”. And Huang (1912) pointed out that the name of “Hui” means Islam, not a nation. In 1940, the central government claimed that Dungans are exactly the same as Han apart from religion, and forbade them to call themselves as a nation.

On the other hand, a few Dungan elites accepted the brand new concept “nation” to define themselves. In Japan, Dungan students found the Islam Educational Association, and raised the question of “who are we” for the first time on their publication *Awaken Dungan*, which represents the awakening of their unique identities. According to Sha (2015), 270 Dungan publications appeared from 1907 to 1949, strongly promoting acknowledgement of Dungan’s identities. Meanwhile, the invasion by Japan has strengthened their acknowledgement as Chinese citizens. On the journal *Awaken Dungan*, they also proclaimed that “our relationship with China is different from foreigners”, and then more precisely, “we are Chinese citizens, we are one of the Five Races”.

## 2.2. Identities after 1949

Since the Chinese Communist Party took Stalin’s theory as the guide for national policy, in the 1950s, the work of national identification began, and Dungan (Hui) was officially and legally recognized as a nation. Finally, Dungan communities scattered all round China was under the process of integration. From then on, nobody would doubt his or her identity as a Dungan.

However, with an attempt to replace religions with Marxism atheism, the Cultural Revolution from 1968 to 1978 suppressed Dungans. The freedom of religion in the constitution became an empty promise. During this period, state discourse took the place of nationalism completely. Dungans were forgetting their national and religious identity, and civic identity has been tremendously strengthened.

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1978, a de facto pragmatism replaces Marxism in the national discourse. As a result, nationalism has come back again. However, the loyalty to the state still remains strong. In Gui’s (2010) interview, with a sample population of 214, nobody said there are conflicts between Muslim identity and civic identity. In summary, as a nation combined by religion, Mecca is their spiritual homeland, and China is their homeland in reality.

## 3. Identities of Kazak

### 3.1. Identities in History

So far, studies on Chinese Kazak and Uyghur are far from enough to draw a clear picture, and most of them are empirical studies.

**Table 3: Population of Kazaks in Xinjiang until 2000**

Year	Population	Growth Rate
1933	477,000	9.15%
1944	438,575	-8.06%
1949	443,655	11.58%
2000	1,250,458	19.37%

Source:

In 1759, Qing China has defeated the Dzungar Khanate, Kazak Khanate started to communicate with China. From 1860s, with the permission of Qing government, some tribes of Kazak started to move to China, mainly in Ili – one of their homelands. To escape from the suppression of Tsarist Russia and Soviet Union, approximately more than 500 thousands Kazaks moved to China, which makes them a typical cross-border nation. In Qing Dynasty and Republic of China (1644 -- 1949), nationalism did not have a strong influence, and Kazak’s civic identity was still ambiguous.

The East Turkestan independence movements helped spread the Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism, which will be discussed later.

### 3.2. Identities after 1949

In 1955, Kazak also has been recognized as a nation. Due to the short history of Kazak nationalism, generally national identity of Kazak manifests as memories about clans and tribes (Xiao, 2011). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the independence of Kazakhstan inevitably influenced identities of Chinese Kazaks. It constantly reminds Kazaks of their common historical memory and strengthens their national identity. In 1992, president of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev called upon all Kazaks to move back to Kazakhstan. Until 2010, over 50 thousands Chinese Kazaks have moved back to Kazakhstan (Zhao, 2011).

**Table 4: identity survey among Kazak in Ili in 2011**

	Identities	Percentage
Your first identity in daily life	Xinjiang People	11.2%
	Kazak	12.07%
	Chinese citizen	50.00%
	Muslim	26.72%

Source: Xiao, R. (2011). A study on national and civic identities of Kazak.

**Table 5: identity survey among Kazak college students in Xinjiang in 2017**

	Identities	Percentage
Your first identity in daily life	Xinjiang People	5.79%
	Kazak	36.82%
	Chinese citizen	49.91%
	Muslim	7.48%

Source: Xiao, R. (2011). A study on national and civic identities of Kazak.

In Xiao's questionnaire survey in Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture (see Table 4), we can see that the civic identity (as a Chinese citizen) is much higher than Kazak and even Muslim. In another survey (see Table 5), Kazak researcher Hejihai (2017) reveals that 36.82% of Kazak college students take Kazak as their first identity. However, in the same article, Hejihai (2017) states that 96.07% of Kazak college students are proud of their identity as Kazaks. This is close to reality. The distortion of the first two surveys shows the power of state discourse in Kazak's daily life as well as the contradiction between different identities. Apart from literatures mentioned above, Sun (2015) points out that in Universities, national identity of Kazak is weaker than Uyghur, and civic identity of Kazak is stronger than Uyghur but weaker than Dungan. The materials are far from enough to draw a conclusion. We can only conclude that the civic identity of Kazak is at a moderate level, national identity is strong, and religious identity is relatively weak.

## 4. Identities of Uyghur

### 4.1. Identities in History

**Table 6: Population of Uyghurs in Xinjiang until 2000**

Year	Population	Average Annual Growth Rate
1953	3,640,125	-
1964	3,996,311	0.85%
1982	5,963,491	2.25%
1990	7,207,024	2.40%
2000	8,399,393	1.94%

Source: <http://www.xbrklzu.com/UploadFile/Issue/2jdmddgd4.pdf>

Uyghur is the largest minority group in Xinjiang. According to the Orkhon inscriptions, the name comes from the Turkish word "Oghuz", which means tribe or alliance. Its origin date back to Dingling<sup>3</sup> in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. In the year of 744, it defeated Turks and established the Uyghur Khanate. In 840, the Uyghur Khanate was defeated by Kyrgyz, and had to migrate to the west. One group of them founded the Kingdom of Qocho in the Turpan Depression, the other founded the Kara-Khanid Khanate in the west of the Pamir Mountains. However, the Kingdom of Qocho believed in Buddhism and Manichaeism, while the Kara-Khanid Khanate believed in Islam.

<sup>3</sup>Dingling, an ancient ethnic group living in Siberia.

In *the DīwānLughāt al-Turk* (the Turkic language dictionary), the Turkic scholar Mahmud Kashgari called the QochoUyghurs the most evil enemy. At that time, they did not have the same national mental consciousness, and were only loyal to their region and religion.

In 1514, the foundation of the Yarkent Khanate ended the division of Uyghurs. It has promoted the formation of common language, common religion, and common customs of Uyghurs, and Uyghur's ethnic fusion with the native and Mongolians was completed. But since the enclosed geographical environment of south Xinjiang, Uyghurs had a strong regional identity instead of a national identity (Li, 2009).

In 1759, the Qing government has controlled Xinjiang, and set it as a province in 1884. But there was no civic identity among Uyghurs. After the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, Pan-Turkism, or more precisely, Uyghur nationalism was extremely popular in Xinjiang. In 1930s, incited by the Soviet Union, two short-lived Uyghur states has been founded in Xinjiang: the Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkestan, and the Hotan Islamic Kingdom. Failures of independence are constantly striking Uyghur's collective memory again and again, especially for young Uyghur intellectuals: they believe that Uyghurs had one or more independent states in their glorious history (Li, 2009).

Nevertheless, it would be indiscreet to see this as the whole story. As mentioned above, Xinjiang is the frontier of the clash of civilizations. There was another trend: the development of the civic identity. In 1938, the famous Uyghur poet Lutpulla Mutellip wrote down this poem: "China, our homeland! We are born and raised in your warm, chaste embrace." Thousands of Uyghurs took part in the battle against Japanese invasion.

#### 4.2. Identities after 1949

Like Dungan and Kazak, Uyghur was recognized as one legal nation in 1955. For some unknown reason, not until the 1960s, schools in Xinjiang still used Soviet textbooks. From the 1980s, as the rising of Uyghur nationalism and Wahhabism, the authority started to put special attention to Uyghurs.

**Table 7: Relationships between Uyghur and Han (%)**

Viewpoint	Uyghur			Han		
	Pro	Con	Don'tknow	Pro	Con	Don'tknow
Most Uyghurs are reliable	86.3	3.0	10.6	83.3	6.7	10.0
Most Hans are reliable	64.8	8.8	26.3	83.0	7.5	9.5

Source: Li, X. (2009). *Civic, national, and religious identities of Uyghurs*.

Chen (2005) did a research about Uyghur's identities, stating that 95.5% of Uyghurs agree that Uyghur is a member of the Chinese nation, 92.4% feel proud of their identity as a Uyghur, while the figure for Han is only 54.3%. The most interesting part is the survey about relationships between Uyghur and Han (see Table 7). Clearly there is a big gap between Uyghur and Han. Guo et al. state that most Uyghurs agree with the principle of disestablishment, only 4.3% feel that religion is supposed to intervene into politics. On the other hand, however, Uyghur scholars Memeti et al. (2014) hold a more convincing opinion. They found that Uyghurs have a rather positive religious identity, and civic identity is weak.

#### 5. Conclusions

Since nation is an imagined community, history, religion, state, literature, and media all have a say on this issue. China is a country dominated by Han nation and its culture for thousands of years. Consequently, the discourse resources are not in the hands of small nations in China. Therefore, the mainstream always tries to define and manage small nations, and it produces the counterforce to help their own identities.

As discussed above, both Uyghur and Dungan have strong religious identity, Kazak's religious identity is relatively lower compared with them. Dungan has the strongest civic identity, while Uyghur has the weakest. And Uyghurs have the strongest national identity. However, because of the great power of different discourse, all small nations are living and struggling in the cage of identities. It is our responsibility to help them find a way out until the realization of final fraternity.

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