

# Comment on "Xinjiang's Uyghurs in the Ensuing US-China Partnership"

Monday, 10 June 2002

by Turdi Ghoja

Comments on Prof. Justin Rudelson's testimony, Xinjiang's Uyghurs in the Ensuing US-China Partnership, (http://cecc.gov/pages/roundtables/061002/rudelsonStatement.php3) from the June 10, 2002 Congressional-Executive Commission on the People's Republic of China: Ethnic Minorities in China: Tibetans and Uyghurs.

The so-called "affirmative action" type economic reward is a myth. Yes, Uyghurs can have two children, if that what it is referred to, compared to one for the Chinese, but, that policy originated in the 80's when the Chinese policy towards minorities was less oppressive than it is now. The authorities were aware that minorities do not open their arms to the Chinese immigrants. They knew that imposing the stringent birth control policy on them while moving thousands of Chinese to their land every day would not be well received. Having just come out from an era of upheavals, China was not confident back then to be able to deal with another upheaval at a time they still saw most of the world, including the might Soviet neighbors, were out there to get them.

The equation has changed dramatically to China's favor since then. China has not reversed the birth control policy on minorities, but, it has made quite clear that it does not need people, it just need the land. Another thing often cited as the "Affirmative Action" is the college entrance exam. It is a subject for a long discussion. In my opinion, "Affirmative action" type of economic rewards do not exist. Affirmative action could not survive in a place where people do not have the freedom to speak for their rights. Open discrimination and persecution is the norm in a land where only one side has the right to speak and the other side has no choice but to keep silent.

Yes, the economy has developed significantly, but, the Chinese settlers are the primary beneficiaries. China develops our region for its long term strategic interests and to strengthen its hold on our region. Benefitting the Uyghurs is the last thing they have in their mind. The majority of educated Uyghurs are secular, but, they are not anti-Islamic. While it is not uncommon that some of them blame religion on some of the social ills, but, I cannot imagine any one in his right mind would actually seriously hate Islam and advocate blowing up Mosques. The truth is most of them feel like they are on a sinking ship and want to blame some one or some thing for their mishap.

Religion is one of the favorite scapegoats for some of them. But, when it becomes a serious talk, no true Uyghur intellectual blames Islam for the social problems. One or two ill informed "intellectuals" do not represent the educated Uyghurs. One of the common complains about religion is more money is invested in Mosques than in School.

While it might have a truth to it, it does not mean people care less about school education. I happened to read a 1992 issue of Xinjiang Education Daily which listed the names of the top 50 donors to schools in that year or in 1991. I was deeply impressed that about 80% of that list including the top 7 donors was made up from Uyghurs. A number of Uyghurs in Atush alone donated hundreds of thousands of yuan each. Most of them were traders with no or little school education. That was a lot of money back then and now. For a couple hundred thousand yuan an Uyghur school could be built in a typical Uyghur town. I do not know how much of that money actually went to Uyghur schools which perhaps those Uyghur donors intended to help.

Another prominent example is a group of Uyghur businessmen in Ghulja formed a foundation to help Uyghur education. Their scholarship even reached United States. They are not intellectuals, they are just ordinary Uyghurs who care about education and religion. Things like that tell how deeply the uneducated older generation, whose affiliation with the Islam is the underlying cause for the discontent about the religion, cares for education. The most obvious example would be how desperate the Uyghur parents are to get their kids into college. Some of them are willing to go through hell to send their kids to school and college. Being from a typical Uyghur peasant family, I know what it takes to go to school and college for some one from the countryside. I also know how deeply people care about education. The real source of the problem lies at the lack of a social structure to promote education. The "Uyghurs need not apply" sign on the horizon makes it a steeper hill to climb.

The religious and secular Uyghurs co-exist in peace and respect each other everywhere. The secular life styles are tolerated and understood even in the most conservative and religious corners of East Turkistan. Any behavior alien to the traditional Uyghur society encounters moderate resistance and social pressure at the beginning, but, it can be accepted at the end if there is persistence. Disapproval of each other does exist among the religious and secular groups, but, respect and tolerance for each other's way prevail.

I want to take two examples from my life experience to highlight this point. These examples are not unique to me - they can represent the general situation. The first one happened when I was in high school. I was visiting my aunt who was in her 70's and living with her son in the neighboring village. A middle-aged truck driver neighbor of her was invited to the dinner that night. I do not know whether he, who traveled frequently to other cities including the Urumchi, wanted to impress me with his worldliness or he would have done it without me, he started to throw dirt on religion as if it was evil culprit for all problems.

An extremely pious Muslim, my aunt yelled at him: "enough, you kafir! you chicken's sh-t (a word used by old woman, means very bad person), keep it for yourself", and walked away cursing him. My cousins also chuckled disapprovingly. The truck driver who obviously knew what kind of response he would receive laughed amused. My aunt reappeared a couple minutes later. She treated the truck driver as if nothing happened, obviously she forgot what he said. It was clear that they care for each other great deal even though they are at the two ends of the religious spectrum. The truck driver dared to attack religion in front of those very religious people because he trusted that it would not change how those people see him and treat him. He knew and expected, rightly, the others knew that he was still one of them even though he did not share their religious beliefs.

The second story happened during a summer break when I was in college. I was visiting my uncle who was a Molla (Islamic leader) well known in our town and surrounding regions. Serving alcohol to important guests became quite popular among young people back then. My uncle's son wanted to serve alcohol in my honor, but, we could not drink in the presence of my uncle. It would be a great disrespect to him, not just because he was a religious person, but, we were not supposed to drink in the presence of elders. My uncle sensed what we were up to. He was visibly upset, but, left the house with some lame excuse. We understood that he went out to leave us alone for our alcohol party even though he strongly disapprove drinking. I remember I felt awkward and wished he stood firm on his ground, but, it did not prevent me from enjoying the party and drink.

Even if we look back on history, it becomes quite clear from the works of prominent historical Uyghur figures from different Islamic eras, for example, Mahmud Kashgari (11th century), Amannisahan (16th Century), Abduhalik Uyghur and Lutpulla Mutellip (first have of the 19th century), that Islam has never been a rigid road block for social development.

Majority of the Uyghur population today falls somewhere between secular and religious and plays a buffering role between that small portion of the population split between strictly religious and firmly secular. The two sides, secular and religious, have no conflict with or bad feeling to each other. In fact, it is quite common that secular people have best friends who are strict Muslims, and strictly religious and firmly secular people live under the same roof. My mother and sisters are pious Muslims. It is the culture not the religion that binds Uyghurs together. Of course, that culture is heavily influenced by religion.

No matter how secular we are, we know that there is a line we are not supposed to cross. It is the line which defines our belongings. It is vague, but, we are always aware of its existence, the religious ones are also aware of that line. Both sides understand that as long as we do not cross that line we are belong together no matter what our religious convictions are. The line has different latitude to different people, but, the ultimate limits are: no one consciously eats pork, every one has sense of family about the fellow Uyghurs regardless of their differences (Of course, there is bickering in any family). If we cross that line we know that it would be a violation of the mutual trust and contract with the rest of our countrymen and we would lose that leverage to proclaim and preach our secular beliefs among them.

Uyghurs have an easy-going life style. They have been famous for singing, dancing, playing music and writing epic love stories and poems, not for following rigid norms. The flip side of the coin is lack of social discipline. Any thing goes in Uyghur society as long one does not cross that line. The drug problems, the alcohol problems and some other social problems are blamed on this.

When people feel powerless, threatened and falling apart, they search for something to hold on to, something that gives them a sense of order and discipline. One of the obvious stops, in any society, is religion. That is one reason why religion is making its way into among the college educated young Uyghurs. They perceive the religion as the solution to the problems they are concerned about. It seems to be more common for women to complain about lack of discipline and finger-point at men since they are perceived to be the ones who are supposed to establish and enforce discipline.

If any confession for being anti-Islamic, an image of a young guy who has little social experience but likes to impress others with his "sophistication" and "intellectuality" jumps out in my mind. They could be in their 20's, but they are the parallel to the searching teenagers here. People mature slower there because the shelves are half

empty. They do things and say things to impress radical people. The another group could be responsible for such anti-Islamic view is the passionate fans of the western culture delivered by the Hollywood.

They live in their own dream world, some times growing themselves out of touch with their surroundings. They are more likely to cross the way of western visitors since learning English and hanging around English speakers is their primary hobby. In attempt to show that they have nothing to do with the backward society they live in, they finger point at things they are not affiliated with, and say what they think the foreigners like to hear. It is a very small group of just a few people. I would not recommend them for sampling unless they are the subject. College graduates who went to Uyghur high schools (they are referred as Minkaomin) represent the majority of the educated Uyghurs. The older generation of that group represents the mainstream secular culture of the educated Uyghurs.

I get annoyed some times by the strict religious rules, and I might even have insulted the religion and religious people at times and tried to persuade them to come my way for various temporary reasons, but, in all seriousness I always remember that the secular me has grown out from them, they let me be the way I am and respect me the way I am, I can count on that I can maintain my secular life style among the most religious Uyghurs without any worry, therefore, I always hold respect for them, which they so much deserve. That is the reason I do not feel like a hypocrite when I campaign against the religious persecution in East Turkistan. I know how much does it mean for my mother, uncle, sisters and friends to be able to live by religion. They deserve to live their lives in the way they feel comfortable just like I deserve to live my life in the way I feel comfortable.

In conclusion, the religion among Uyghurs does not interfere with social development, it is part of the solution not the problem. It could become a problem if the natural balance is disrupted. Islamic extremism has never been a problem in East Turkistan, but, it can be picked us as a defensive weapon if the Chinese government keeps pushing people against the wall. Among the few militants, both secular and religious Uyghurs equally represented. They all fight for an independent East Turkistan where the religious and secular Uyghurs live in harmony as they always do and enjoy the freedom to express who they are, and build a free and prosperous homeland together.