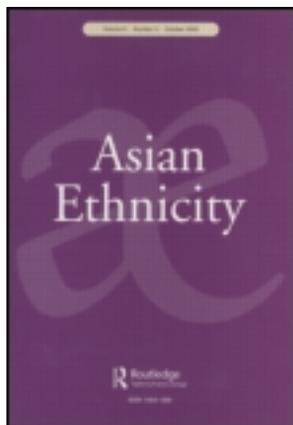


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## Asian Ethnicity

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that there has been a relaxation of political control in the 1990s; the CCP and the central government are no longer interested in the 'micro' control of everyday social and cultural life; Maoist ideology has become an historic ruin; and the CCP no longer has the energy, or the political will, to defend Maoism as long as the party itself is not attacked.

These conclusions amplify what many others have said about the 1990s. Yet this picture does not apply evenly to the entirety of the People's Republic. Political control has not everywhere been relaxed in the same way; minority intellectuals face a seemingly different set of state demands and negotiate a different range of personal and collective experiences from their Han counterparts; and the CCP still has the energy to quell what it sees as excessive forms of ethnic nationalism. As in previous decades, the Chinese nation—however it is to be defined and whoever is to be included in it—remains a contested idea in the 1990s. As the essays in this fine collection reveal, minorities are in the thick of the battle.

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**Justin Jon Rudelson**, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China's Silk Road*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997. xv + 209 pp. Tables, maps, figures, references and index. ISBN: 0-231-10786-2 (cloth) 0-231-10787-0 (paperback). US\$16.50 (paperback), US\$42.50 (cloth).

This excellent, and important, volume is the result of the first prolonged anthropological fieldwork ever conducted in modern Xinjiang. Based upon work done there in 1985–90, it explores the inter- and intra-ethnic tensions that foster or undermine 'minority nationalism' and demonstrates how geographical and social boundaries shape competing ethnic identities at the local oasis and regional levels. As the author, Justin Rudelson, notes, '... by piecing together Uyghur history, I learned something startling: as they are presently defined, the modern Uyghurs have existed only since 1935' (pp. 4–5). Prior to that year, he adds, the name Uyghur was not associated with Islam. This prompted the author to trace the shifts in Uyghur identity over its 1,200-year existence.

1985 was a watershed year in the development of Uyghur nationalist ideology; not only were new freedoms extended to Uyghur intellectual elites to construct their own versions of Uyghur history, but international borders were reopened, permitting the re-establishment of transborder contacts and international trade networks. Basing his fieldwork primarily (but not exclusively) in the Turpan oasis, Rudelson's main purpose was to understand how nationalist ideologies filtered down to create a Uyghur identity in the local oases of the region and how such a local understanding of Uyghur identity affected the generation and propagation of contending intellectual views in the regional capital, Urumchi. 'It became clear', he notes, 'that Uyghur identity was more fragmented by social group (intellectuals, peasants, and merchants) and occupation than by family type, descent, or ethnicity' (p. 8).

Thus, conceptions of the Uyghur nationalist ideology often contrasted dramatically among these groups, and embedded oasis identities undermined efforts of intellectuals—who were held hostage to their own parochial oasis outlooks—to shape a uniform Uyghur nationalist ideology. Moreover, the interests of Uyghur intellectuals and peasant oasis dwellers were found to be fragmented and crosscutting, with the self-identification of peasants and merchants posing the greatest challenge to the acceptance of the nationalist ideologies being framed by Uyghur intellectuals. Thus, Rudelson observes, 'while the name *Uyghur* is considered by Central Asian scholars to mean "confederacy" or "unity", intellectuals are finding it difficult to guide the disparate oasis dwellers, subsumed under the same ethnic identity, to a unified vision that might fuel a nationalist movement' (p. 9). This, of course, runs contrary to the Chinese central government's more inclusive view as symbolised by the naming of the 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region' and its frequent references to non- (and anti-) Han, pan-Turkic (and Uyghur) nationalisms that periodically are said to threaten state unity.

The 'key' to understanding the tremendous cultural diversity of Xinjiang, which the author says exists not only among the various Muslim nationalities, such as the Kazaks, Uyghurs and Tungans, but also within the Uyghur nationality itself, is geography—particularly the relative isolation of and distance between the oases of the region. 'Expressions of Uyghur nationalism', he states, 'vary greatly by social group and by location in Xinjiang. For the most part, modern scholars have viewed Xinjiang as a single entity; lacking a clear understanding of the region's geography, their studies have fundamentally misread Uyghur identity and the Uyghur nationalist struggle' (p. 168).

In his assessment of Uyghur identity and nationalism, Rudelson explores the religious, social and historical factors that have influenced the evolution of the ethnic group's mosaic of ethnicity. Based upon his investigations, he argues that Xinjiang is composed of four distinct geographical regions, each influenced by a different bordering culture, and that this geographical legacy influences the nature of Uyghur nationalism. The more recent opening of the region's borders, furthermore, has radically changed Uyghur world-views and notions of what constitutes Uyghur ethnic identity. These renewed trade and cultural ties have, in fact, exacerbated rivalries between, and within, the oases and further fragmented Uyghur identity and inhibited the growth of pan-ethnic unity. Nonetheless, some Uyghurs draw hope from current policies that indicate it is in China's interest to foster the development of historical trade networks, believing it is beneficial for China to increase the number of Uyghurs who leave the country to visit relatives, and thereby strengthen trade networks—a revitalisation of the historical role of Uyghurs as middlemen who better connect China with the world to the west.

Rudelson speaks of a greater awareness among Uyghur intellectuals of the importance of historical knowledge—and the more glorious achievements of their forebears, which lend a sense of pride and self-respect. In understanding Uyghur history, he claims, it is possible to envision a future breakdown of the modern Uygur people along historical and geographical lines—somewhat like that of the former Yugoslavia, though probably much less bloody. But, perhaps in their growing recognition and acceptance of these historical divisions, the Uyghur groups will be able to work with, rather than against, the Chinese government. He concludes with the observation that the Uyghur people are faced with a conscious historical choice. They can either build their future, or renounce the present and that future in their preoccupation with the past. The latter choice could lead to destruction, to open and violent confrontation with the Chinese state resulting in tragic massacres such as the one at Tiananmen Square in 1989. 'The search for history, the wrestling with and recovery of local heroes and oasis identities, may propel the Uyghurs to a better future, with prospects for a greater autonomy, heightened respect from the Han Chinese, a better standard of living, freedom of travel and trade with the independent Central Asian republics, and perhaps—though unlikely—independence from China' (p. 175).

The author's first-hand, in-depth observations thus provide us with a much better understanding of the nuances *within* and difficulties attached to Uyghur nationalism and identity and serve as a corrective to the widely held view of the monolithic nature of such ethnic outlooks. His work goes much beyond that of the interesting, but brief, first-hand coverage of Xinjiang and its peoples by the late A. Doak Barnett in his 1993 volume *China's Far West: Four Decades of Change*. Rudelson effectively critiques the important, but overly-simplified, 'us'/them', Han versus non-Han model applied by many Chinese policy-makers (and by most scholars) who have not documented, let alone recognised, such intra-group differences, as well as the former's frequent efforts to obtain control through the imposition of 'divide-and-rule' tactics between the region's ethnic groups. This is a good read, and one that adds much-wanted depth to our appreciation of the nature and evolution of ethno-nationalist politics.

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