

Introducing the Uighur to High School Social Studies Students a Guide for Teachers

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Abstract

The Uighur are an oppressed minority that have recently been in the media spotlight. This article is intended to help high school social studies teachers understand what is happening to the Uighur in China and why it is happening. It explains who the Uighur are, where they live, and what educational and economic opportunities are available to them. It also relates the actions that the Chinese government has taken with respect to the Uighur, including expanding Han Chinese migration into Xinjiang, the Uighur homeland, and the widespread detention of Uighur in what the Chinese government refers to as re-education facilities.

Key Words: Uighur, Xinjiang, Han Chinese, Conflict Theory, Strain Theory, Islam

INTRODUCTION

The Uighur are a Sunni Muslim Turkic people with a strong sense of national identity. They are physically distinguishable from Han Chinese, and many do not speak Mandarin or speak it poorly. The Uighur have the largest proportion of elderly, and one of the largest proportions of young people of any Chinese ethnic group. The Uighur face a number of social and economic challenges. They have a higher death rate than Han Chinese, and Uighur in China, on average, do not live as long as Uighur in neighboring countries. The Uighur traditional homeland is China's largest province, Xinjiang, a mostly desert province that borders Afghanistan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Russia and Tajikistan. Xinjiang also borders the Chinese provinces of Gansu, Qinghai and Tibet, which also has issues with human rights violations. Xinjiang produces one-third of China's cotton, 40% of China's coal, and has rich resources of gold and copper. Xinjiang also contains oil reserves estimated at up to 40 billion tons.

CHINESE TREATMENT OF MINORITIES

China has the world's oldest continuous civilization. Roughly 92% of China's 1.4 billion people are Han Chinese. The Chinese government classifies the 55 minorities that make up the remaining 8% of the population according to an evolutionary scale of material progress. There are an estimated 10 million Uighur living in China, making them China's 5th largest minority. According to China's constitution all ethnic groups are equal, and the state guarantees the legal rights and interests of all ethnic minorities. However, the reality is quite different. The religious freedom of minorities is strictly limited. The Communist Party has long viewed religion with suspicion. In 2001, 8,000 imams were re-educated by the Chinese government. In 2019 the total number of Uighur who have been detained and re-educated is estimated at 2 million. Regional autonomy is nonexistent. All leading positions in the governing organizations of minority regions are held by Han Chinese. And at the highest decision-making levels of the Chinese government there is a complete absence of minority officials. Minorities receive little in the way of economic support. Economic subsidies in Xinjiang have resulted in an increased growth rate in the region's GDP but the positive results of China's economic support programs have, for the most part, only benefited the majority Han.

In many areas with a significant population of minorities, there are two-track school systems. In theory they should provide equal quality education, but in practice they don't. Uighur teachers are not attending the same universities as Han teachers, if they attend universities at all. Schools don't have the same facilities, and Uighur students struggle to learn to speak mandarin and read Chinese. The illiteracy rate among Chinese minorities is 42.5%. Minorities also have to contend with racism. Many Han Chinese look down upon minority groups, viewing them as backward and dirty. Uighur are disparaged as being human faced but animal hearted, and their homeland Xinjiang is considered a wasteland.

HAN MIGRATION INTO XINJIANG

In a rural setting where the minority people are mostly farmers, they are largely left to themselves and only interact with Han Chinese on market days. Because of this the blocked social mobility of the Uighur has not in the past presented much of a problem. But the Uighur have not stayed in rural areas, and the Han have been moving to Xinjiang. In an effort to "develop" Xinjiang and make it less restive the Chinese Government has been encouraging – and sometimes ordering- Han migration to the province. Han Chinese have gone from being only 6% of the population of Xinjiang in 1949 to slightly over 40% in 2019. Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, is 85% Han. The Uighur have become a minority in their own capital city. The Han move to Xinjiang, open shops, work at banks, and many are sent there as company managers. They hire other Han for the best paying jobs. In Xinjiang, the unemployment rate of the Uighur is about 70 percent, while the unemployment rate of the Han is less than one percent.

UIGHUR COPING STRATEGIES

So, now you have a less educated people who have become a minority in their capitol, can't practice religion the way they want, and are struggling to find work. What do they do? They move. High levels of unemployment among Uighur in Xinjiang have caused many to migrate to China's coastal cities in search of work. But they haven't done much better there. Many have been unable to find work. The lucky ones tend to work at restaurants selling Uighur cuisine. But most find temporary work doing manual labor, or nothing at all. So, what do they do to survive? Statistics suggest they turn to crime. This is consistent with prevailing social theory that minorities who are aliens in a dominant society and suffer from blocked mobility turn to crime. The sad reality is it's very difficult to get accurate information out of China. The Government controls the information apparatus and exaggerates, alters, and outright falsifies statistics to suit its own purposes. The Chinese government claims the Uighur are committing crimes, and while the government's numbers may be exaggerated, anecdotal evidence suggests that some number of Uighur engage in criminal activity. The Uighur could be considered an extreme case study to be understood within the framework of Conflict Theory. Their religious activities have been widely suppressed and deemed illegal by the Chinese ruling authority. But there is another possible explanation for Uighur criminality—societal change. China's economic reforms have created opportunities for many to get rich, especially in the growing private sector, while others, such as groups like the Uighur- are left out of the economic prosperity. Social inequality is developing on a scale never before seen in China. In the absence of other opportunities, crime can provide a shortcut to becoming rich, or at least getting by. Add to this a relative break down of external control (switching jobs, population migration) and a breakdown of internal control (the change in social values since the reform) and, in accordance with strain theory, in any given society an increase in the crime rate can be expected. The main idea behind strain theory is that crime is not an innate character trait, but rather the product of blocked mobility. People aren't inherently evil- they just want a piece of the proverbial pie. The effects of poverty can be devastating to the aspirations of those who struggle to improve their lot. Seemingly devoid of any other way out, impoverished people sometimes turn to crime. High rates of crime along with high rates of unemployment, and poverty, often go hand in hand. Basically, there are certain goals strongly emphasized in each society. When society holds out the same goals to all its members without giving them equal means to achieve them, a strain is created, and deviance follows.

CHINESE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PERCEIVED UIGHUR CRIMINALITY

The Chinese government has responded to public perceptions of a crime wave with national campaigns that encourage the police to disregard protections provided by the criminal procedure laws under the slogan "strike hard against crime." Crime and incarceration rates for disadvantaged minorities greatly exceeds those of the majority. Xinjiang also has the highest number of executions in China averaging 1.8 per week, most of them Uighur.

ISLAM

Uighur society is more equal concerning gender issues than most other Muslim societies. However, this does not mean that a woman's place in society is equal to that of a Uighur man, especially in rural areas. Many Uighur women wear headscarves, a practice becoming less common, especially among those living outside of Xinjiang. There is a widespread custom of early marriage, having children early and having many children – especially in Xinjiang's countryside. Polygamy is also still in existence today among Uighur in rural areas but increasingly less so. Birth control has been introduced in Xinjiang as well, but it is in opposition to Islamic teachings, and thus many Uighur women cannot practice it. Uighur animosity towards Han Chinese has a long history, but likely reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution when mosques in Xinjiang were razed, public prayer was banned, and Muslim schools were shut down. Things like this, although not on the same scale, are still happening today in Xinjiang. In the 1980s China relaxed some of its repressive policies. For a little while Uighur were allowed to travel to Mecca for the Haj. Many Uighur began using Islam as an instrument for distinguishing their values from the atheist values promoted by the Chinese authority. Islam became an even bigger part of the Uighur identity. During this period, some Uighur came into contact with radical Islamist groups. And for some, on some level, that form of Islam was radicalized, and they carried out terrorist attacks, which in turn led to violent reprisals. Most Uighur today support using peaceful means to achieve the desired goal of real autonomy or independence. However, the Chinese government failure to distinguish clearly between separatism and legitimate political, cultural, and religious expression does nothing to reduce tensions in Xinjiang. Quite the opposite it guarantees a continuing cycle of violence.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese government is restricting how the Uighur worship in an effort to prevent separatism. Uighur in Xinjiang have endured the closing of places of worship, and more restrictions on religious activities. At the same time evidence suggests the Uighur are increasingly using religion as an identity that separates themselves from China. The Han are helping Xinjiang develop. They have built infrastructure, exploited resources, and increased the region's GDP. But most Uighur are left out of the prosperity, and increasingly they are struggling to find employment in their home province. Uighur who migrate to cope with the social and economic upheaval have also struggled to find work. Many don't speak Mandarin which makes it even harder for them to find good jobs. Anecdotal evidence suggests some Uighur turn to crime. This does nothing to improve public perception held by the majority Han that the Uighur are criminal minded and backward. Meanwhile the Uighur feel stigmatized and that their everyday activities- including how they worship- are being criminalized by the ruling elite.

STUDENT GROUP ASSIGNMENT

Imagine your table is a Chinese government committee assigned to deal with the Uighur issue. At your table, come up with potential coping strategies minority groups use to deal with social, political, and economic difficulties (being criminalized or perceived as criminal by the State and majority society).

Assess the situation

Why do you think the alleged Uighur crime problem exists? (Include a theory i.e. Strain Theory in your answer).
What can the Chinese Government do to reduce Uighur crime and separatism?
What can the Uighur do to better their situation? Should they make efforts to assimilate into Han society? What might those efforts include?

Points to consider

Language: Should the Uighur be forced to attend schools that teach the majority language (Mandarin)? Or is that oppression? If they are allowed to maintain their ethnic language (identity), does it limit their opportunities in majority society?

Racist attitudes: How will you convince the Han the Uighur are not a backward, criminal minded people? How will you convince the Uighur, after years of perceived oppression, not to hold animosity toward the Han?

Development: Xinjiang is resource rich. Han companies are developing the region but the Uighur are being left out of the better jobs and prosperity. How will you solve this problem?

Administration and religion: Should the Uighur have more of a say in the future of their province? The Communist Party has long viewed religion with suspicion, fearing the ability of religious leaders (like the Dali Lama) to unite people. Party members are (publicly) atheist. Should the Uighur have more freedom of religion? Does religion come into conflict with the ability to govern in the best interests of China?

Present your findings

And debate! Let's see who has the best solution to a complex issue threatening the stability of a region.

UIGHUR WORKSHEET

1. What religion are the Uighur?
2. Why are the Uighur migrating out of their ancestral homeland?
3. What (in a nutshell) is the Theory of Conflict Criminology?
4. List some of the major changes modern China is experiencing.
5. What efforts has the Chinese Government made to assist in Xinjiang? Have these efforts been effective? For whom?
6. How has the Chinese Government reacted to the increasing crime rate?
7. List 3 ways in which ethnic and religious minority groups tend to suffer more than the majority.
8. List 3 strategies minority groups may use to cope with social, political, and economic difficulties.
9. The theory that unequal access to the legitimate means to attain societal goals causes a strain in society and leads to crime is:
10. Why is Xinjiang important to China?

REFERENCES

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