

# The “Uyghur Issue” From the Kazakhstan Perspective

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The Uyghur ethnic identity and their autochthony of Xinjiang continue to be a subject of academic discussions. However, Chinese authorities as well as Chinese scholars have a permanent position on these matters and reject any alternatives. The “Uyghur issue” has already become a part of the geopolitical game impacting world politics and academia as well. Kazakhstan is a good example of this influence. It has a long common border with northwestern China, a large Uyghur diaspora, and historical connections with Xinjiang. Nonetheless, academia nowadays puts Uyghur Studies in a peripheral position, first of all, because of the geopolitical factor. In this article, I focus on the Uyghurs’ ethnic identity and autochthony of Xinjiang based on the historical background of this region covered by Kazakhs and other international historians. It helped me identify the origin of the “Uyghur issue” in the modern context, which explains why there is no global consensus on who the modern Uyghurs are and whether they have the right to claim independence of the territory of modern Xinjiang. During Xi Jinping’s era, control over Xinjiang has sharply strengthened and Kazakhstan has conspicuously showed solidarity with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The Uyghurs’ separatist aspirations are practically suppressed, but the voices of human rights supporters and Western academia have become louder, attracting the attention of the world community to the “Uyghur issue”.

*Keywords:* Xinjiang, Uyghurs, Kazakhstan, Tarim Basin, Central Asia

## Introduction

As China’s leading role in Central Asia has risen, the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has played a significant role in further bilateral relationships. The scale of economic and trade cooperation between Kazakhstan and China’s Xinjiang has been expanding over recent years, growing by 34 percent to exceed US\$24 billion in 2022. The countries put US\$35 billion by 2030 as the goal of trade turnover. The head of XUAR, Ma Xingrui, made a rare trip abroad visiting Kazakhstan at the end of March 2023 on a trade mission<sup>1</sup>, where 16 inter-regional trade and other agreements were signed. Kazakhstan is a key node in Beijing’s ambitious project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>2</sup>, which was announced by Xi Jinping in Astana and became one of his primary initiatives. Kazakhstan, a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), took the chairmanship of this organization in July 2022, benefitting within the framework of the SCO on integration into the world economy. The SCO Summit in 2023 was primarily centered on security-related concerns. “In general, China’s

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<sup>1</sup> More about Ma Xingrui’s trip in the SCMP article. Access: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3215156/xinjiang-communist-party-boss-ventures-kazakhstan-trade-mission>.

<sup>2</sup> The BRI is an initiative with the stated aim to connect China with Europe through Central Asia (namely, Kazakhstan), and Southeast Asia. The initiative benefits Kazakhstan’s and XUAR’s economies, in particular by increasing trade with China, attracting Chinese and other investments, establishing logistics hubs, etc.

cooperation with Kazakhstan is carried out through Xinjiang”, said Ma Xingrui<sup>3</sup>.

The economic development of XUAR goes with the strict security apparatus to crack down on any separatist movements in the region. Xinjiang borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, which places a strategic importance for the Chinese government to maintain stability and safety along the northwestern border. China’s long-lasting concern is the activity of different rebellion and separatist groups, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)<sup>4</sup>, which seeks an independent state called “East Turkestan” or “Uyghuristan”<sup>5</sup> and rejects the official Chinese name Xinjiang (新疆, “new frontier”). For rebels, East Turkestan is the desirable independent state that they would like to establish and lead within modern Xinjiang territory. According to some sources, ETIM has claimed that East Turkestan would cover an area including parts of Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and XUAR<sup>6</sup>.

Since 2002, the People’s Liberation Army has been conducting military exercises in Xinjiang with the Central Asian countries, as well as Russia, to combat “East Turkestan terrorists”. The deepening relationship between Kazakhstan and China makes any kind of Kazakh opposition to China’s policies in Xinjiang or the Uyghur diaspora in Kazakhstan<sup>7</sup> activity exceptionally difficult and the official Astana position toward the Uyghurs ambiguous. However, Kazakhstan is the most impacted by the situation in XUAR, taking into account the long common border, large Uyghur diaspora, and historical connections with that territory. Sean R. Roberts emphasized that “Uyghurs in Kazakhstan is not a diaspora, but one that has developed in the porous borderlands between Kazakhstan and XUAR in the Ili River Valley”<sup>8</sup>. That means they have family connections with ones who live on the Chinese side of the border.

The Uyghur indigeneity of place or autochthony of Xinjiang is still a subject of academic discussions, sometimes using very conflicting narratives. Discussions about the Uyghur’s ethnic identity depend on who is defining it. Nowadays, the “Uyghur crisis”, “Uyghur question”, or “Uyghur issue”<sup>9</sup> has become an object in a new political game, geopolitical manipulation, very similar to the period of the Great Game in Central Asia in the 19th century. Is there a consensus and where is the conflict between different scholarships on the “Uyghur issue”? Is academia influenced by political factors? How is the “Uyghur issue” considered in Central Asia and the world nowadays?

To answer these questions, I present some historical background of XUAR through the lens of facts of the ethnogenesis of the Uyghurs, reflect on the Uyghur autochthony of Xinjiang from different perspectives, and analyze the origin of “Uyghur issue” in the modern context. The expertise of Central Asian historiography is important due to the historical and geographical proximity to this region and because of the strengthening of

<sup>3</sup> Another report on Ma Xingrui’s visit to Kazakhstan. Access: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-activists-almaty-detained-xinjiang-protest/32336574.html>.

<sup>4</sup> ETIM was considered a Muslim separatist group. The U.S. Treasury Department listed ETIM as a terrorist organization in 2002 during a period of increased U.S.-Chinese cooperation on anti-terrorism in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. However, in 2020 ETIM was removed from the list because “for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist”. China asserts ETIM was transformed into the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP).

<sup>5</sup> “East Turkestan”—a term of Russian origin. “Uyghuristan” means the “land of the Uyghurs”, a potential state that rebels would like to establish within Xinjiang. There is no consensus among rebels whether to use the “East Turkestan” or “Uyghuristan” name.

<sup>6</sup> The Council on Foreign Relations published information on ETIM. Access: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim>.

<sup>7</sup> There are roughly a half million Uyghurs in Central Asia. Kazakhstan has the largest Uyghur diaspora outside China, numbering over 200,000.

<sup>8</sup> The ASAM forum published an article by Sean R. Roberts about Kazakhstan’s position towards the Uyghurs. Access: <https://theasanforum.org/kazakhstans-ambiguous-position-towards-the-uyghur-cultural-genocide-in-china/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Uyghur crisis”, Uyghur problem”, or “Uyghur issue”—different terms are used by international media, officials, and academia.

China’s regional leadership in the Xi Jinping era. The interview with Ablet Kamalov<sup>10</sup> helped me clarify some controversial points and generate a conclusion about the Kazakh expert’ view on the future development of the “Uyghur issue”.

### **The Uyghurs’ Autochthony of Xinjiang**

The first significant studies on the Uyghur autochthony of Xinjiang were carried out by Russian and Soviet researchers in the 19th and 20th centuries<sup>11</sup>. Their fundamental works laid the foundation for the future formation of a separate academic direction—Uyghur Studies. Many future Chinese, Japanese, Western, and other scholars based their work on the Soviet historiography of the Uyghurs (Tursun, 1997)<sup>12</sup>.

The Uyghurs passed “the evolution from steppe-nomad tribal confederation, to settled seminomadic kingdom, to dispersed oasis traders, and finally, to a minority nationality of the People’s Republic of China” (PRC) (Gladney, 2004). The establishment of sovereignty is the key goal of pro-independent movements in Xinjiang as well as the East Turkestan Government-in-Exile<sup>13</sup> and its followers outside the PRC. Sometimes the actions of the rebels are accompanied by terror attacks<sup>14</sup>. As the Western consensus on the “Uyghur issue” argues that there is a “cultural genocide” occurring in Xinjiang, the Chinese scholars in the Xi Jinping era either support the official China position<sup>15</sup> or prefer not to do any research on Xinjiang, considering this region as a red line of official Beijing.

As per professor Kamalov, the autochthonous issues, like other issues of ethnic history, always have political overtones. In other words, they are not purely academic in nature, and are always associated with political preferences. In those cases when ethnic groups have their own states, the academic interpretation easily adapts to politics and ideology. The authorities usually use all possible instruments of influence, and choose and legitimize the interpretation that has political necessity, and alternative points of view to go to the periphery of discussions. In the Uyghur case, there can be no any global consensus on the Uyghurs’ autochthony of Xinjiang, simply because the Uyghurs do not have a state of their own; they are a minority ethnic group in all countries where their representatives live, including XUAR.

Ablet Kamalov defined the “Uyghur issue” as a group of questions corresponding with Chinese Uyghurs and Chinese State interactions. It means not only attempts at the secession of the territory and creating an independent state of East Turkestan, but also the different forms of Uyghurs’ resistance to the PRC’s authorities, ethnic group survival tactics, and other forms of the Uyghurs’ rights protection. In other words, on one hand, the Uyghurs claim a state of their own, but on the other hand, they claim for the ethnic identification of Uyghurs and the guarantee of their rights, and require true autonomy within the China State.

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<sup>10</sup> Ablet Kamalov, Director of the Center for Regional Studies at Turan University (Almaty, Kazakhstan), Dr. Habil, Professor of History.

<sup>11</sup> Among the most well-known are D. Tykhonov, N. Bichurin, E. Bretschneider, V. Barthold, B. Litvinsky, B. Gurevich, L. Duman, and A. Malyavkin.

<sup>12</sup> Ablet Kamalov, however, noted in the interview, that the Western researchers dealing with the modern history of the Uyghurs and Xinjiang practically do not use the research of Soviet Scholarship, or use some. This can be explained by the strong ideological component of the Soviet research, as well as lack of knowledge of the Russian language: Most researchers of the Uyghurs and Xinjiang in the West speak Uyghur or Chinese, but not Russian.

<sup>13</sup> Access to the East Turkestan Government-in-Exile website: <https://east-turkistan.net/>.

<sup>14</sup> The global terrorist database shows 135 incidents in Xinjiang. The last one was fixed in 2017, according to GTD data. Access: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?page=1&search=Xinjiang&charttype=line&chart=overtime&ob=GTDID&od=desc&expanded=yes#results-table>.

<sup>15</sup> The permanent mission of the PRC to the UN office in Geneva and other international organizations in Switzerland states the position on XUAR: [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/ANNEX\\_A.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/ANNEX_A.pdf).

For a better understanding of the “Uyghur issue” nowadays, it’s necessary to analyze the ethnogenesis of the Uyghurs, which is represented differently in historiographies, and the Uyghur ethnic identity as well.

All Uyghur people truly believe in their historical connections mainly with Tarim Basin<sup>16</sup>—a territory in Northwest China occupying an area of about 888,000 km<sup>2</sup> in China’s modern Southern Xinjiang region<sup>17</sup>. The historical name for the Tarim Basin is Altishahr (六城 or ألتى شەر), which means “six cities” in Uyghur (Figure 1). The Uyghurs historically refer to this area collectively as “Uyghuristan” or “East Turkestan” or “Chinese Turkestan”. Kamalov noted that modern researchers do not have a common opinion regarding the use of the concept of “East Turkestan”, which appeared in Russian science in the 19th century and then became widespread. The concept of “East Turkestan” is related to the concept of “Turkestan”—the country of the Turks or the country inhabited by the Turkic peoples. East Turkestan has always been inhabited by Turkic peoples, including the Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and others, but the Uyghurs make up the predominant population. The word “Turkestan” was used in the Arab-Persian historical and geographical writings of the medieval period. This term became widespread in the 19th century, when researchers conventionally divided the entire Turkestan into three parts: “Russian or West”, “Chinese or East,” and “Afghan Turkestan”. Thus, the synonym for the geographical concept of “East Turkestan” for a long time was the concept of “Chinese Turkestan”. Nowadays, the concept of “East Turkestan” in the PRC is forbidden, and no one can use it, except when this term is criticized. In Turkey, on the other hand, “East Turkestan” is an accepted concept and there is strong solidarity with the Uyghurs in society.



Figure 1. Map of Tarim Basin.

Source: Kmusser—Own work using Digital Chart of the World and GTOPO data, labels based on GEOnet<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> According to some sources, the Uyghurs have also historical connections with Junggar and Turpan Basins. Ablet Kamalov in the interview shared his opinion that “East or Chinese Turkestan” should be considered as the entire territory of the modern Xinjiang, including two geographical zones—Kashgaria (in the south) and Dzungaria (in the north).

<sup>17</sup> The southern part of the province, or Nanjiang (南疆 *nánjiāng*; lit. “Southern Xinjiang”).

<sup>18</sup> Access: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tarimrivermap.png>.

The Uyghurs argue that their ancestors belong to the territory within modern Xinjiang, but Beijing’s position is different. China depicts Uyghurs as migrants from the present territory of Mongolia in 840 CE, but the Han as people who settled down there much earlier. That’s the one of the key contradictions between Chinese and other historiographies<sup>19</sup> and China does not tolerate any alternative visions. Chinese scholarship also points out that ancient people of Turpan Basin were largely Buddhists, who called themselves Huihu (回鹘), but the term Uyghur (维吾尔族) was formatted much later, and Islam is a main aspect of modern Uyghur identity.

The definition of the Uyghur ethnic identity can be found in several variations, which means there is no global consensus on who the Uyghurs are now. It consists of different fragments. The fragmented nature of the Uyghur identity is explained not only by political reasons but also by different historiographies of the ethnogenesis of the Uyghurs, which could be considered from the perspective of Chinese, Western, Japanese, and Soviet<sup>20</sup> scholarships.

During the long period of their development, the Uyghurs were colonized by different “authorities”, which created an identity for them every time. Soviet and Chinese influences played a crucial role in determining the modern Uyghur identity. As per Gladney, the Uyghurs were divided by religious conflicts (competing Sufi and non-Sufi orders), territorial and political loyalties, linguistic discrepancies, and commoner-elite alienation (Gladney, 2004). According to Kamalov, the Uyghur ethnic identity manifests itself in accordance with the social, economic, and political situation of the Uyghur people in the states where they live.

Nowadays, the Uyghurs inside and outside of China have different opportunities and challenges, which complicates the (monolithic) homogeneity of the Uyghur identity. Outside the PRC, the Uyghurs in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Turkey, Germany, or the U.S. seek protection, creating cultural, political, and humanitarian organizations to attract more attention to the “Uyghur issue”. As an important achievement, all these actions have become visible to the Western governments and Western scholarships. The Uyghurs have achieved public protection from the side of different Human Rights Organizations.

Almost 90 percent of the Uyghurs live in XUAR<sup>21</sup>; the rest mostly live in Turkic countries. The territory of living is the most critical for Uyghurs: Religious, linguistic, political, and social discrepancies become more visible. That would confuse the future understanding of Uyghurs’ identity, universal and monolithic ethnicity. The Western vision of the Uyghur identity promises to give the Uyghurs autonomy from Russian, Chinese, and Islamic domination for further liberal democratic development, which is unlikely possibly due to the rising role of the PRC in Central Asia and the leading position in SCO. From the Chinese perspective, the Uyghurs are the Muslim minority in the China State with separatist sentiments, which requires the higher secularization and Sinification of Xinjiang. There are also Pan-Turkic, Pan-Islamic, and Uyghuristan autonomy visions. If the pan-Turkic approach to the Uyghur identity considers their right to self-determination for Turks people in a Turkestan land<sup>22</sup> led by pro-Western Ankara, the pan-Islamic vision sees the Islamic expansion to Xinjiang using radical measures and anti-Western narratives. The Uyghuristan autonomy vision is described as a peaceful solution to

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<sup>19</sup> Ablet Kamalov in the interview emphasized that there is no single point of view on the autochthonous nature of the Uyghurs from the Western scholarship perspective. The question of the autochthonous nature of the Uyghurs is the basis of various narratives, including two opposite ones—the Uyghur and Chinese narratives.

<sup>20</sup> Speaking of the Soviet scholarship in this context, the main contribution was made by Russian and Central Asian scholars.

<sup>21</sup> The total Uyghur population in the world is around 13.5 million, but it’s not certain. According to The Seventh National Population Census of the People’s Republic of China, published in 2021, the total population of Xinjiang was 25,852,345 persons, including 44.96% the Uyghurs (11,624,257) and 42.24 % the Han (14,932,247). Access: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220613171035/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgtrt/eng/news/t1884310.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Davis and Azizian described it as a Turkey project to stretch its influence across Central Asia into Xinjiang.

constructing a more autonomous Xinjiang within the China State without any foreign financial or military assistance (Davis & Azizian, 2007).

To understand how Central Asian Historiography sees the Uyghurs’ autochthony of Xinjiang, I examine the expertise of two Kazakh researchers—Konstantin Syroezhkin<sup>23</sup> and Ablet Kamalov, adding the thesis of other international sinologists.

K. Syroezhkin’s fundamental work *Myths and Reality of Ethnic Separatism in China and Security of Central Asia* has attracted the significant interest of researchers. In his book, Professor Syroezhkin described the process of ethnogenesis in Central Asia as one that was affected by unique elements of the environment, peoples’ migration, conquests, cultural diversity, and political factors. This region was populated by a variety of tribes that at various times united into states and even empires, but then disappeared. Central Asia has always been a polyethnic region. Steppe-nomad peoples interacted with settled peoples and the borders of the political units often changed and did not correspond to the territories where certain ethnic groups lived. According to Syroezhkin, the modern Uyghurs are not native inhabitants of Xinjiang. He explained that the ancient nomadic Uyghurs, who believed in the teaching of Buddha, moved into the territory of Xinjiang and became settled and eventually Muslims. The Oirats<sup>24</sup> and the Mongols’ domination in this region affected the Uyghur’s identity, even forbidding them from using the term “Uyghur” for their ethnicity. Another scholar from Japan stated that the term “Uyghurs” was not used to refer to modern Uyghurs until 1935 (Saguchi, 1984). Also, Rudelson emphasized that the designation Uyghur derives from the influence of Soviet advisors in Xinjiang in the 1930s (Rudelson, 1998). Many scholars referred to the conference of emigrants from Tarim Basin held in Tashkent in 1921<sup>25</sup>, where the consensus was reached that the term “Uyghur” had to be taken to all people who had been living in the area of Tarim Basin, such localities as Kashgarlikhs, Aksulikhs, Lobniks, etc. But this term was generally adopted only in 1934 (Chen, 1977).

Another argument of Professor Syroezhkin is that the famous Uyghur Khaganate in the VIII-IX centuries had its center in modern Mongolia—in Karabalghasun, which was located far from the territory of modern Xinjiang. Professor Syroezhkin’s research results correspond with Chinese historiography, which says Uyghur migrated from present Mongolia to the oases of the territory of modern Xinjiang in 840. Dru C. Gladney also mentioned a historical fact that “the early Uyghur kingdom having been based in what is now Mongolia and the present region of Xinjiang being under the control of the Chinese state” (Gladney, 2004, p. 206). Consequently, according to Syroezhkin and the official Chinese position, the Uyghurs cannot claim the lands of the whole of Xinjiang or even the Tarim Basin territory. In other words, Professor Syroezhkin doubted the Uyghur autochthony of this region.

However, Professor Kamalov, objecting to Syroezhkin’s position, argued that “in ancient times all the populations of Central Asia were Indo-Iranian, but that doesn’t prevent all modern Turkic nations from claiming autochthony within their current territories”.<sup>26</sup> In the Middle Ages, the territory, where the modern XUAR is located, and Central Asia made up a single ethno-cultural zone and the modern borders were created only in the time of the Russian and Qing empires. According to Kamalov, the modern Uyghur ethnic group should be

<sup>23</sup> K. L. Syroezhkin—Kazakh sinologist, Ph.D., Academician of the Academy of Political Sciences of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Kazakhstan Academy of Social Sciences, Honorary Professor of the Xinjiang University of the XUAR of the PRC.

<sup>24</sup> The Oirats are a group of Mongols whose ancestral home is in the Altai region of Siberia, Xinjiang, and Western Mongolia.

<sup>25</sup> See works of Dru C. Gladney, A. Kamalov, D. Brophy.

<sup>26</sup> Central Asia Program published an interview with Ablet Kamalov: On Studying the History and Contemporary Situation of the Uyghurs. Access: <https://centralasiaprogram.org/interview-ablet-kamalov-studying-history-contemporary-situation-uyghurs/>.

considered as the mixing of ancient Indo-Iranian tribes and a Turkic component. However, analyzing the European scholarship, he admitted that the history of Uyghurs has become the most discussed theme in Turkology.

In his research, Kamalov described how the formation of the Uyghur national idea or the idea of the existence of a single Uyghur nation originated in the Russian Empire at the turn of the 20th century. The national discourse penetrated Russian Central Asia, indeed, the Semirechye Taranchi. In his article “Birth of Uyghur National History in Semirech’ye”, Kamalov analyzed the work of Taranchi intellectual Nāzāryoja Abdusemätov<sup>27</sup>, who proposed the idea of the “Uyghur nation”, which was the starting point of the Uyghurs’ national history foundation. Abdusemätov replaced the previously used name the Sarts with the Uyghurs, people who live in Chinese Turkestan. However, Abdusemätov advocated the national history only of a regional group of the Uyghurs living in the Ili and Semirech’ye areas (Kamalov, 2016).

This fact of the formation of the Uyghur identity in Russian Central Asia could explain why the Uyghurs were aware of themselves as part of Central Asia and the Turkic world and refused to identify themselves as a part of the “one Chinese nation”.

### Uyghurs’ Separatism

The period when Kashgar along with Dzungaria became a part of the Manchus’ Qing empire in 1759 could be considered the start of the “Uyghur issue”<sup>28</sup> in a modern context because the Uyghurs have been claiming their rights in different forms ever since. The Uyghurs’ social and political status has been evaluated depending on the historical period and rulers’ policy, on their sociopolitical and socioeconomic incorporation.

Roughly the first hundred years after the Qing conquered Xinjiang, “the local population was allowed to keep their religious leaders, follow their own dietary rules, and not wear the queue”<sup>29</sup> (Ebrey, 2010, p. 227). The native population generally accepted governance from the Qing Empire, and did not provoke any violence by rebellion movements, which allowed it considerable self-rule (Rossabi, 2022). The PRC government uses this fact as proof of loyalty, which indicates acceptance of such governance from the beginning<sup>30</sup>.

Gladney stressed that the migration of Hans into Xinjiang in the 19th century should be considered the beginning of the colonization of the region. There was the 13-year period of independence—Muslim Kashgar Emirate in the south (1864-1876), established with British support. Ya’qūb Beg, probably an Uzbek in origin, succeeded in unifying the entire East Turkestan, also putting Dungan Khanate in Dzungaria under his control. His name is fixed in Uyghur history as a national hero. As per Kim, during this period the Uyghurs were set apart from the Chinese state. However, despite the Muslim governance, they were divided into ideological and socioeconomic factions, which caused their downfall in the end. The collapse of the Muslim Empire was self-destruction rather than the result of the Qing’s conquest (Kim, 1986). Warikoo also observed that in the 19th century “national consciousness among the Uyghurs was conspicuously absent” (Warikoo, 1985, p. 107).

In 1884 Xinjiang officially became a province of China. Nowadays, the representative of official Beijing often refers to this date as an argument that this territory was integrated into the China State much earlier than the PRC establishment in 1949. The Xinhai Revolution in Xinjiang (1911-1912), which ended with the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, brought Han control over Xinjiang under the rule of a Han official named Yang Zengxin.

<sup>27</sup> The book *Ili Taranchi Türkliriniñ Tarihi* (History of the Taranchi Turks of Ili) was published in 1922 in Soviet Kazakhstan.

<sup>28</sup> However, Qing did not try to incorporate this territory into Han Chinese at the beginning.

<sup>29</sup> Wearing the queue became a symbol of the Manchu conquest of China.

<sup>30</sup> Ablet Kamalov in the interview mentioned the territory of Xinjiang was just a backward periphery of the Qing Empire.

Since then the new period of the “Uyghur issue” began as Han domination in all spheres of Xinjiang’s life had only increased.

In the 1930s-40s, the region was under Soviet influence, which could be explained by intensification of trade and logistics development with Central Asia and Russia. China perceived it as a threat of the rise of the USSR influence in Xinjiang and potential annexation of the territories<sup>31</sup>. Because of this, Xinjiang was isolated for some period from the outside world, which delayed the modernization of the region and the process of nation-building. Later, two periods of independence for Uyghurs<sup>32</sup>, which reflected the heightening of Uyghur national ideas and the rise of nationalism spirit, however, also collapsed because of a lack of unity. People were divided by political, religious, and military factors. Kamalov emphasized that the loss of Soviet support should be considered as a key factor of the fall of the Second East Turkestan Republic.

Since 1949 the threat of separatism in Xinjiang has remained the biggest headache of the PRC authorities. The policy of suppression of the Uyghurs awakened the strengthening of ethno-national identity of the Uyghurs as a response. The greater pressure provoked the stronger resistance and solidarity of various social and local groups of the Uyghur population in China and in diasporas. However, during the Xi Jinping era, the State control sharply hardened, and Xinjiang has become a highly securitized territory, declaring success in the war on terrorism, separatism, and any radical initiatives.

To explain the origin of the “Uyghur issue”, Professor Syroezhkin analyzed some prerequisites of “Uyghur separatism”.

XUAR has a very fragmented administrative structure<sup>33</sup>, which exists only in XUAR and could be explained as a government policy to divide the ethnic groups inside the region for easier control. Nowadays the Uyghurs are concentrated mostly in Hotan Prefecture and in Kashgar Prefecture—the regions of southern and southwestern Xinjiang, which is the territory of the above-mentioned Tarim Basin (Figure 2). The capital of XUAR Ürümqi has a larger Han population (74.91%)<sup>34</sup>, which obviously is not representative of all the ethnic groups of Xinjiang. Han domination in regional politics and economy is one of the reasons why Uyghurs have to perceive their class position by different means. The multi-ethnic society of Xinjiang was marked by Han discriminatory attitudes and practices that put the Uyghurs in opposition to the dominant Han group and made them feel like members of the lower class of the social hierarchy<sup>35</sup> (Zang, 2016).

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<sup>31</sup> To clarify about the probabilities of annexation of Xinjiang territory by the USSR, Ablet Kamalov shared his opinion in the interview that these are slightly exaggerated estimates: The Soviet Union was only interested in exploiting the resources of the region. Managing the region would have required too many of its own resources and could have provoked conflict and even military confrontation with China. Therefore, the Soviet Union first of all tried to establish economic relations. The USSR was also interested in creating friendly regimes in Xinjiang.

<sup>32</sup> The First East Turkestan Republic, created in the south of the province from November 12, 1933, to April 16, 1934, was the result of a pro-independent movement of the Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnicities of the region; and the Second East Turkestan Republic existed between November 12, 1944, to December 22, 1949, in three northwestern regions (Ili, Altai, and Tarbagatai), which was reached with the Soviet support and according to the Soviet scenario.

<sup>33</sup> Xinjiang is divided into 13 prefecture-level divisions: four prefecture-level cities (Ürümqi, Karamay, Turpan, and Hami); five prefectures (Aksu Prefecture, Kashgar Prefecture, Hotan Prefecture, Tacheng Prefecture, Altay Prefecture); autonomous prefectures for Mongol (Bortala Mongol Autonomous, Bayingolin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture), Kazakh (Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture), Kyrgyz (Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture), and Hui (Changji Hui Autonomous) minorities, which are then divided into districts, county-level cities, counties, and autonomous counties.

<sup>34</sup> According to Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region People’s Government Census Leaders’ Office (August 2012).

<sup>35</sup> It’s important to add that all Chinese minorities feel the same way.



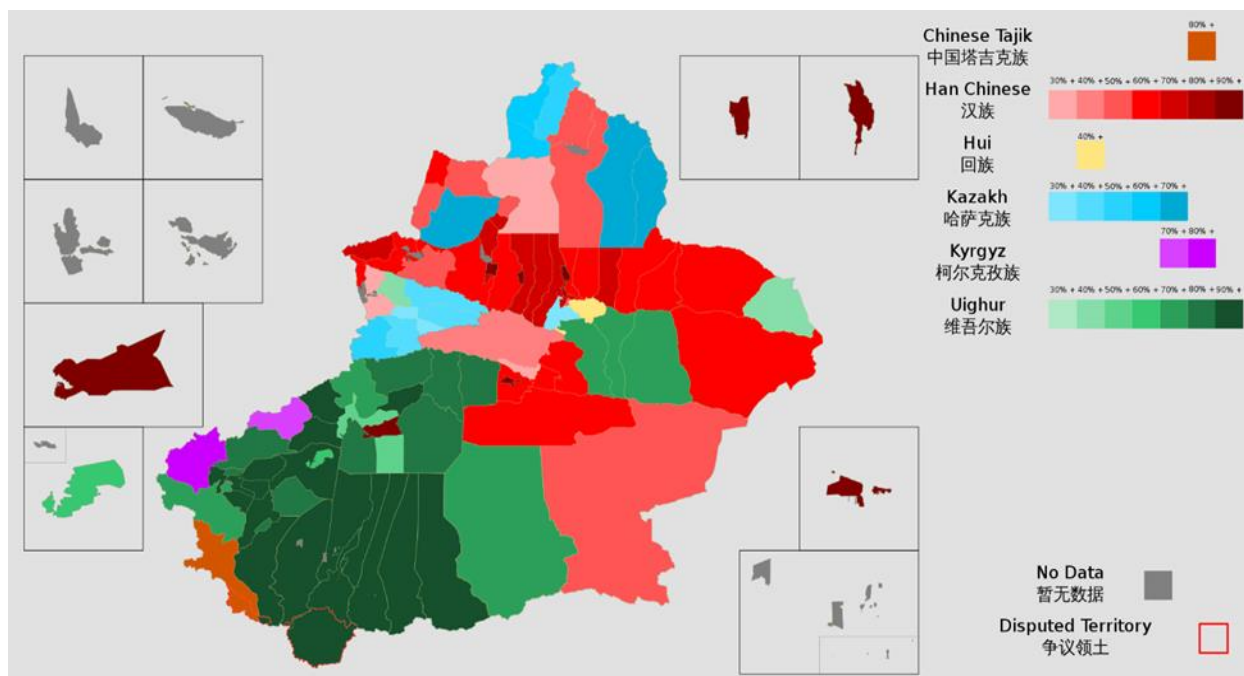


Figure 2. Ethnicity map of XUAR.

Source: Amtoastintolerant—Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0.<sup>36</sup>

Syroezhkin mentioned, indeed, that the Chinese Uyghurs had not enough resources as well as power, unity in the region, and the level of education to reach the independence goal, though they had been acting through several Uyghur cultural, political, and other types of organizations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some of them supported the separatist aspirations, and the means were not always legitimate. In his book<sup>37</sup>, Syroezhkin showed the evolution of different Uyghurs organizations<sup>38</sup>, some of them having acted with the purpose to “help the Uyghurs in their national liberation movement, with self-determination in the historical land, to establish independent state Uyghuristan”. They suffered from competition for leadership that challenged their unity. The activity of these organizations posed a security threat to the region and led to Uyghurophobia, indeed, in Kazakhstan, according to the scholar.

Kamalov confirmed the existence of Uyghurophobia in Kazakhstan, explaining this fact in historical context by four key factors: traditional contradictions between nomadic and sedentary societies; the growth of Kazakh and Uyghur nationalisms (which led to confrontation); the Soviet policy of supporting the development of Soviet Uyghurs and turning Kazakhstan into the Uyghur cultural center in the USSR; the intention of creating autonomy for the Uyghurs in Soviet Kazakhstan (report of 1947), which stimulated local Uyghur nationalism and caused rejection of Kazakh society. Kazakh nationalists are especially concerned by the existence of the administrative

<sup>36</sup> Access: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=110907213>.

<sup>37</sup> In this article I refer to Syroezhkin’s book *Myths and Reality of Ethnic Separatism in China and Security of Central Asia*. In 2015, he published another book *Xinjiang: Big Question for China and Kazakhstan*. Unfortunately, I failed to find it in public access.

<sup>38</sup> In the Kazakh Republic, he mentioned the Inter-Republican Association of Uyghurs, which was founded in 1992 in Kazakhstan with the purpose to unite the Uyghurs from five Central Asian Republics. In 1995 this Association split into two organizations, one of them the regional public association “The Association of Uyghurs”, and the other “Uyghurs Culture Society of the Republic of Kazakhstan”. Also, the National Republican Front of East Turkestan, later United National Republican Front of East Turkestan and Uyghuristan Liberation Organization, and others.

Uyghur district in the Almaty region<sup>39</sup>. They constantly raise the issue with Kazakh authorities of renaming it and Uyghur villages with Kazakh names.

Talking about “Uyghurs separatism”, Syroezhkin mentioned two groups of Uyghur supporters, who have different goals and missions. The first one does not pose any security threat in the region, but acts to defend their rights using legal methods. This group claims the absence of Uyghur representatives in the key political and economic administrative positions of XUAR. It talks about the low level of autonomy, which does not correspond with the Constitution of the PRC<sup>40</sup>. The lower level of education and professional qualification of the Uyghurs in one of the growing regions in China also put them in unfair competition with Han in the labor market. Industrialization of XUAR has led to another vital problem—an ecological crisis that also provokes rebellious sentiments. Over-exploitation of the national resources destroys the landscape, causes ecological problems, and also demolishes the Uyghur religious heritage in pursuit of economic goals.

The second group is the radicalized one, aiming to establish the independent ethnic state “Uyghuristan” or “East Turkestan” by any means, even using terrorist practices with foreign support<sup>41</sup>. This group poses a security threat to China as well as to the whole region of Central Asia. Among the reasons of improving China-Afghanistan relations after the US withdrawal was the necessity to crack down on the activity of these radicalized movements<sup>42</sup>. Nowadays, the rise of Chinese political influence on neighboring countries has played a crucial role in terminating any kind of activities that are classified by Beijing as separatist aspirations.

Somehow, Syroezhkin in his book did not mention the strengthening of control of the Uyghurs’ religious life, indeed, the limitation on Islamic practices and Islamic education, the destruction of mosques, madrasas (religious schools), shrines, and cemeteries. Islam is a key part of Uyghurs’ identity. And this should be considered as a primary cause of the “Uyghur issue”.

According to Kamalov, the “Uyghur issue” in China is now more a social conflict brought on by excluding Uyghurs from the process of economic development of the strategic region of XUAR, and all other factors that exacerbate the “Uyghur issue” are secondary.

There are big overseas Uyghur diasporas in the U.S., Turkey, Central Asia, and Germany advocating for the rights and welfare of the Uyghur people, supporting their goal of self-determination or even their separatist aspirations.

In the modern period, there are several Uyghur advocacy organizations that officially promote peaceful ways of Uyghur development within China and in the diaspora, attracting the attention of the world community to the “Uyghur issue”. Among them, World Uyghur Congress (WUC), Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP)<sup>43</sup>, Uyghur American Association (UAA), Uyghur Academy<sup>44</sup>, Campaign for Uyghurs, Uyghur Refugee Relief Fund

<sup>39</sup> Wikipedia on Uyghur district. Access: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uyghur\\_District](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uyghur_District).

<sup>40</sup> Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, access to the English version: [http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Constitution/node\\_2825.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Constitution/node_2825.htm).

<sup>41</sup> Syroezhkin, Davis & Azizian, and Rossabi in their books mentioned the relations of Uyghurs’ rebels with al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, which supported radical activity in Xinjiang.

<sup>42</sup> In 2023, China-Afghanistan relationships are intensified, and both countries will take more effective measures to crack down on all terrorist forces including the ETIM. Access to the Chinese MOFA report: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202304/t20230412\\_11057785.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230412_11057785.html).

<sup>43</sup> UHPR recommendations to be raised with China during the 73rd Session of the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights:

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCESCR%2FCSS%2FCHN%2F51307&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCESCR%2FCSS%2FCHN%2F51307&Lang=en).

<sup>44</sup> Access to the Uyghur Academy website: <https://akademiye.org/en/>.

(URRF), etc., report on the human rights abuse and violations in internment camps in the Xinjiang region. Most of these organizations are located in the Western countries. The PRC has castigated these organizations for encouraging dissidents and “splittists”. The Kazakhstan authorities and others in Central Asia are more likely to choose a way of ignoring the “Uyghur issue” or advocating a pro-Chinese position, failing to publicly recognize the violations of the rights of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. Authorities in Kazakhstan have extradited the Uyghurs accused of terrorism to China. Many cases have occurred so far. In March 2023, three Kazakh activists were arrested near the Chinese consulate in Almaty<sup>45</sup>. They demanded the release of their relatives in Xinjiang. Uyghur organizations in Kazakhstan have come under scrutiny, particularly those that promote Uyghur independence narratives.

During Nursultan Nazarbayev’s period, there was a policy of encouraging ethnic Kazakhs to become citizens of Kazakhstan to establish an ethnic Kazakh majority in the country<sup>46</sup>. In this context, it’s important to note there are parallels between Soviet and Chinese projects of Russification in Central Asia and Sinification in Xinjiang. If Russification in Central Asia was relatively successful from the beginning, the Sinification and securitization of XUAR accelerated sharply in the Xi Jinping era, though the territory of Xinjiang had been under China’s domination since the Qing conquest in 1759. Since 1991, nearly 1 million Kazakhs have returned “home”, including a large number from China. They are called “Oralman” (“returnees”). Atajurt Kazakh Human Right Organization was created by Oralman activists with the purpose to protect the rights of Kazakhs in China. This organization was banned by the Kazakhstan government a few years ago as it created a significant dilemma in terms of relations with China. This is an illustrative example of political influence. Nowadays, the Uyghurs organizations in Kazakhstan have mostly cultural and educational missions. The Uyghur Ethnocultural Center was founded in 1989 and is still running, headed by Ershat Asmetov. In his recent interview, he mentioned that “Kazakhstan is one of the only countries where the Uyghur ethnic group has the opportunity to publish a newspaper in their native language and where children of this ethnic group can study in Uyghur schools”.<sup>47</sup> Also, the Republican Social Association “Republican Union of Uyghurs” of Kazakhstan<sup>48</sup>, headed by Shavhat Nazarov, mainly helps with the Uyghur diaspora’s incorporation into Kazakhstan society.

As Sean R. Roberts stated, the “Uyghur crisis” has become “a geopolitical issue that is pitting states around the world against each other”<sup>49</sup>. As proof, the last United Nations vote on Xinjiang on October 6th, 2022 showed 19-17 votes against holding a debate on Uyghurs<sup>50</sup>, which reflected either political engagement or absence of national expertise on this issue. Four Muslim countries—Qatar, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan, members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)—rejected the motion to hold a debate on human rights abuses in Xinjiang. This shows more solidarity with Beijing than with Muslim-majority countries. However, after the OIC meeting in Pakistan in 2022, observers noticed that the Muslim world was moving away

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<sup>45</sup> The Diplomat article on Atajurt’s activity: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/documenting-the-tragedy-in-xinjiang-an-insiders-view-of-atajurt/>, also about a Russian-American researcher’s ban to enter Kazakhstan: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/08/kazakhstan-researcher-xinjiang-crimes-banned>.

<sup>46</sup> The Economist article about Kazakhstan migration policy: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/01/29/how-kazakhstan-became-more-kazakh>.

<sup>47</sup> Interview of Ershat Asmetov. Access: <https://vecher.kz/predstaviteli-uygurskogo-etnokulturnogo-tsentra-pozdravili-almatintsev-s-dnem-blagodarnosti>.

<sup>48</sup> Access to the “Republican Union of Uyghurs” website: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1528152824224203/>.

<sup>49</sup> The article of Sean R. Roberts on The Asan Forum platform: <https://theasanforum.org/kazakhstans-ambiguous-position-towards-the-uyghur-cultural-genocide-in-china/>.

<sup>50</sup> UN Web TV: <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1w/k1w9tube8v>.

from its traditional alliances with the U.S.<sup>51</sup>, which put the Uyghurs in a more difficult situation. Kazakhstan is currently a member of the UN Human Rights Council and would seem to use this opportunity to open debate on the “Uyghur issue”. However, Kazakhstan voted against the debate.<sup>52</sup> Professor Roberts described how Kazakhstan was always closely interacting with Xinjiang, and moreover, there is a large Kazakh ethnic group that lives in XUAR. The tight political and economic relationship with the PRC puts Kazakhstan in a difficult position, and it prefers to ignore the problem or choose not-against-China diplomacy.

In the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Central Asian states motivated growing separatist movements along the Chinese western border. It forced Chinese authorities to rethink their strategy for dealing with the western frontier and rising unrest in predominantly Turkic-Muslim-populated XUAR. Beijing saw the Central Asian republics as key to Xinjiang’s security and preventing its potential to destabilize PRC policy. In response, Beijing has used various political and economic instruments<sup>53</sup>, promoting its influence through Chinese Global initiatives<sup>54</sup> in the whole region. For this purpose, Xi Jinping created a new platform for relationships in the region—the China-Central Asia Summit. The first meeting of the leaders of six countries was held in May 2023 in Xi’an<sup>55</sup>. This strengthening political alliance and Central Asian loyalty to the Beijing official position influenced academia as well as the activity of all the Uyghurs’ supporters in the region. The Central Asian states publicly support Beijing’s stance on ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, and have detained and sent Uyghurs and Kazakh Muslims back to China, as well as cracked down on cross-border activism.

### **The Prospect of Uyghur Studies**

Kazakhstan used to be the main center of Uyghur Studies during the USSR period and after (1986-1995), where there existed three core divisions that researched the language, literature, and history of the Uyghurs (Kamalov, 2006). The Institute of Uyghur Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Soviet Kazakhstan has been transformed into the Center for Uyghur Studies at R. B. Suleimenov Institute of Oriental Studies<sup>56</sup>. However, discussing Kazakh sinology in general, the experts emphasize that nowadays it’s safer to write works on Chinese history and culture than on the current problems of China and better to rely on the principles of Kazakhstan’s diplomacy—multi-vector, pragmatism, and protection of national interests<sup>57</sup>. Today, Chinese studies have become an ambiguous profession in Kazakhstan, especially after the arrest and conviction for treason of the long-standing Kazakh China expert K. L. Syroezhkin<sup>58</sup>. As a field of research, Uyghur and Xinjiang studies occupy peripheral positions in Central Eurasian studies (Kamalov, 2022). Kamalov explained that in the historiographies of the independent states of Central Asia the researchers prioritized the questions of their own history, not Uyghur history.

<sup>51</sup> Article about OIC meeting in Pakistan: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/china-muslim-countries-tilt-uyghur-abuses-ignored-us-influence-fades>.

<sup>52</sup> France 24 report: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221006-un-human-rights-council-rejects-debate-on-xinjiang>.

<sup>53</sup> For Xinjiang’s economic development, see Golod (2022).

<sup>54</sup> Besides the Belt and Road Initiative, China promotes the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative.

<sup>55</sup> Chinese MOFA report on Xi’an Summit: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202305/t20230519\\_11080116.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202305/t20230519_11080116.html).

<sup>56</sup> R. B. Suleimenov Institute of Oriental Studies organizational structure: [http://old.unesco.kz/natcom/turkestan/r15\\_inst\\_vost.htm](http://old.unesco.kz/natcom/turkestan/r15_inst_vost.htm).

<sup>57</sup> Bulat Sultanov about the problems in Kazakh sinology: <https://cabar.asia/en/experts-discussed-the-problems-of-sinology-in-kazakhstan>.

<sup>58</sup> Central Asian Analytical Network: <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/19261>.

Nowadays, academic research on Uyghur history has gained significant achievements in Europe, the U.S., Japan, and Turkey. The All-Soviet Union Conference on Uyghur Studies was conducted regularly in Kazakh SSR, Alma-Ata from 1986 to 1995. After a gap of about 20 years, the Central Asia Program at George Washington University took the leadership of Uyghur Studies, initiating international open discussion. The First International Conference on Uyghur Studies was held in Washington D.C., USA, 24-28 September 2014<sup>59</sup>; The Second International Conference on Uyghur Studies was in Paris and Brussels, France-Belgium, 17-20 October 2015<sup>60</sup>; The Third International Conference on Uyghur Studies was in Zvenigorod, Russian Federation, 23-26 October 2016<sup>61</sup>. It's important to note that there were no representatives of China scholarship at any of the three conferences.

European academia, namely the Department of East Asian Studies of the University of Geneva, the European Uyghur Institute, and Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences, plays an active role in Uyghur Studies nowadays, organizing two International Uyghur Studies Conferences in 2022<sup>62</sup> in Geneva and an upcoming one in Prague in November 2023<sup>63</sup>.

The contribution of Soviet scholarship to the study of Uyghur history and culture was crucial; after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian academia together with the Russian school took the leadership. However, nowadays in the Xi Jinping era, the leading role is played by Western scholarship and the PRC authorities look critically at any Uyghur Studies expertise other than China's official position. Besides political reasons, there are also many more opportunities to advance Uyghur Studies at the Western centers because of funding. As an example, the leading school in this domain, the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, which contributes to researching and teaching Uyghurs Studies, received two big donations recently “that will enhance the school's Uyghur Studies Initiative” and “advance contemporary China studies”<sup>64</sup>. Yale University provides grants for visiting scholars to research the Uyghurs' cultural heritage<sup>65</sup>, and Harvard University regularly offers a Uyghur language course for students<sup>66</sup> and publishes books and monographs on Uyghurs (Harvard University Press). In 2019 Massachusetts Institute of Technology hosted a conference on Uyghur Human Right Crisis<sup>67</sup>. Boston University and the World Uyghur Congress published the report “Submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) for Consideration on the Report on China Concerning the Rights of the Uyghur and Other Turkic and Muslim Peoples” in 2023<sup>68</sup>. These examples and many others show the big attention to the “Uyghur issue” from Western academia. Chinese scholars have never attended such meetings. However, Uyghurs scholars who live and work outside of China usually contribute to it and would seem to be the only source of information for future research.

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<sup>59</sup> Access to the conference web page: <https://centralasiaprogram.org/event/first-international-conference-on-uyghur-studies-history-culture-and-society/>.

<sup>60</sup> Access to the conference web page: <https://centralasiaprogram.org/event/brussels-and-paris-second-international-conference-on-uyghur-studies/>.

<sup>61</sup> Access to the conference web page: <https://centralasiaprogram.org/international-conference-uyghur-studies-history-culture-society/>.

<sup>62</sup> Access to the conference web page: <https://www.unige.ch/lettres/estas/colloques/international-uyghur-studies-2022>.

<sup>63</sup> Access to the conference web page: <https://orient.cas.cz/export/sites/orientalni-ustav/.content/files/IYS-2023-cele.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> GW Elliott School Receives \$900,000 anonymous donation: <https://blogs.gwu.edu/elliott360/tag/uyghur/> and GW Elliott School receives \$1 million gift to advance contemporary China studies: <https://blogs.gwu.edu/elliott360/tag/elliott-school/>.

<sup>65</sup> Access to the Yale University web page: <http://calendar.yale.edu/cal/event/eventView.do?b=de&href=/public/cals/MainCal/CAL-8a808a5a-85c47cbb-0185-c6cf0851-00000661.ics>.

<sup>66</sup> Access to the Harvard University web page: <https://ealc.fas.harvard.edu/uyghur>.

<sup>67</sup> MIT-Harvard Conference on the Uyghur Human Rights Crisis: [https://calendar.mit.edu/event/Uyghur\\_Crisis](https://calendar.mit.edu/event/Uyghur_Crisis).

<sup>68</sup> WUC Submission to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), access to the report: <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/wuc-submission-to-the-united-nations-committee-on-economic-social-and-cultural-rights-cescr-2/>.

The main reason for this increasing attention from the Western academia side is the destruction of any Uyghur research in China, the disappearance of Uyghur studies in Russia, and its diminishing in Kazakhstan since 2017 when China strengthened the control over Uyghur ethnicity narratives in China. A large number of Western scholars who publish on the “Uyghur issue” have been suspended from entry to China<sup>69</sup>, and some of the scholars are pushed to switch to a different research field than Xinjiang<sup>70</sup>.

### Conclusion

Kazakhstan has a large Uyghur diaspora with family ties with Xinjiang. At the same time, Kazakhstan is strengthening its relations with China, which puts Kazakh authorities as well as researchers in a difficult position regarding the “Uyghur issue”. During the Soviet era, the only Institute of Uyghur Studies was located in Kazakhstan. The All-Soviet Union Conference on Uyghur Studies was conducted regularly in Alma-Ata from 1986 to 1995. However, in the Xi Jinping era, this field of research has become peripheral to Central Eurasian studies, despite Kazakhstan’s close geographical and historical connections with Xinjiang. Academia was influenced by the geopolitical factor, and the leadership of the Uyghur studies moved to the U.S. and Europe.

The “Uyghur issue” has become a geopolitical problem that is pitting countries against each other. Chinese Uyghurs and Chinese State interaction should be considered, on the one hand, as the Uyghurs’ aspiration to establish an independent state, but on the other, as resistance to Han domination in XUAR with the purpose of protecting their rights. There is no global consensus between different historiographies on Uyghur ethnic identity and the autochthony of Xinjiang. The rebels do not have a consensus on the name of the potential state, whether Uyghuristan or East Turkestan, or its exact borders. The term “Uyghurs” was generally adopted only in 1934. Throughout the long historical period, the Uyghurs lacked unity, power, funding, and education, which led to the collapse of the independent states of their own every time. Nowadays, China has cracked down on all Uyghur pro-independent movements as well as securitized the region from terrorist attacks.

The attempts at secession of the territory are considered by Chinese officials as separatism and a security threat to the whole region of Central Asia. The Uyghurs argue that their ancestors belonged to the territory within modern Xinjiang. Chinese historiography rejects the idea of the Uyghurs’ autochthony of Xinjiang, depicting them as migrants from the present-day territory of Mongolia in 840 CE. The expertise of two Kazakh researchers K. Syroezhkin and A. Kamalov, representatives of a single Central Asian Scholarship, also shows the absence of consensus. However, both scholars see the same causes of the Uyghurs’ separatist sentiments. The deeper involvement of Uyghurs in the socio-economic life of XUAR could lower the tension between Chinese Uyghurs and the China State.

Nowadays, Uyghurs outside the PRC, in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Turkey, Germany, or in the U.S., attract more attention to the “Uyghur issue”. Their actions have become visible to Western governments and Western scholarship. Analyzing their recent reports, it is clear that separatist narratives have given way to human rights and ethnic heritage protection rhetoric.

This fact of the formation of the Uyghur identity in Russian Central Asia could explain why the Uyghurs were aware of themselves as part of Central Asia and the Turkic world and refused to identify themselves as a part of the “one Chinese nation”. However, the Central Asian countries will continue to seek closer relations with

<sup>69</sup> All 13 authors of the book *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland* were banned from entering the PRC.

<sup>70</sup> Ablet Kamalov in the interview clarified that for Western scholars, it’s safer to research earlier periods of Uyghur history or intellectual and cultural history of the Uyghurs than it is to research the contemporary period.

the PRC and ignore the “Uyghur issue”, still supporting the Uyghurs’ cultural and educational organizations. As Kamalov stated in the interview, the Uyghurs will not disappear as an ethnic group. They are going through an important period of self-determination that many other ethnicities have experienced over their historical evolution. The Kazakhs also lost millions of lives during the Soviet period (repressions and famine), but have been reborn. The Uyghurs will also exist, perhaps in a slightly different form. Kazakhstan can become a country that will preserve the Uyghur language and culture.

Nowadays, Western academia has taken the leadership from Central Asia and Russia in the future development of Uyghur Studies. However, international sinologists mostly work remotely as on-the-ground research is becoming much harder. Increasing tensions between China and the West could cause cleavage in the scholarships, creating pro- and anti-China camps. The “Uyghur issue” is one of many reasons for this split.

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