

The Uyghurs and China

By George Koo



Mr. Kasim Tuman, a council member of the Uyghur Association of America, was one of the speakers at a seminar on “Ethnicity and Identity in Xinjiang” held at Stanford. My wife and I have been to Xinjiang, in particular to Kashgar where Mr. Tuman came from, and naturally we were interested in what he had to say.

I was struck by some of Mr. Tuman’s statements. Since the forum did not offer an opportunity for a real dialogue and discussion, I thought I would offer some counterpoints and observations in response to what I heard.

Tuman said: The Uyghurs are not interested in mixing with the Chinese for fear of losing their cultural identity. They fear being assimilated by the Chinese culture.

My response would have been: Cultures are not static but dynamic and are subject to influences and stimulus especially from other neighboring cultures. Cultures that do not evolve and remain static become endangered and face extinction with time. The Xianbeis, one of many forefathers of the Uyghurs, used to rule northern China, known in Chinese history as the Northern Wei Dynasty (5th century, AD). They admired the Han Chinese culture so much that they adopted Chinese customs, language and many social and political practices. Indeed the Xianbeis did get assimilated and their own culture became lost to history. But I do not see anything unnatural about this outcome. If people no longer accept or

willing to adopt certain cultural values and practices, that culture will fade away

Cultures can also disappear on the point of the sword. Genghis Khan so thoroughly decimated the Tangut kingdom (*Xixia* in Chinese), another contributor to the Uyghur gene pool, that there is no trace of the Tangut culture remain. The meaning of their writing is lost as is their historical records. The propagation of Islam was also accomplished by military conquest as the religion spread from the Middle East westward to Spain and eastward to the Indonesian archipelago imposing the Islamic religion on the local people and replacing the previous ways of worship.

But use of force has not been how the Chinese culture has proliferated. Non-Chinese people adopted certain aspects of the Chinese culture that they found more appealing than their own. One can see evidence of the influence of Chinese culture in South Asia, Southeast Asia as well as Korea and Japan. These people were not forced to adopt Chinese manners and practices; they willingly did so.

In an attempt to distinguish the Chinese culture from the Uyghur, Mr. Tuman said that it is very much in the Chinese culture for the young people to study hard and strive to attend the best school and best university and to work hard and make a lot of money. This is not part of the Uyghur culture, he said, as the Uyghurs like to take life as it comes. He used a map from

Wikipedia as a platform for his talk. I noticed from the same Wiki article, one of the characteristics attributed ancestors of Uyghurs was “*they showed greed without restraint, for they often made their living by looting.*” Perhaps given that heritage, it is understandable why Mr. Tuman made that distinction between the Uyghur and the Chinese culture.

The map from Wikipedia showed a Uyghur Khaganate that at one moment in history spread from western part of today’s Manchuria westward to nearly the Caspian Sea. Mr. Tuman seemed to imply that the Uyghur people has had a long continuous history since as early as 4th century AD. But a close reading of the Wiki article would reveal that there was no such continuity but the Uyghur state, when it existed at all, ebbed and flowed with time. With mostly nomads as ancestors, it is understandable that continuity would have been difficult and any sort of ethnic purity and identity even more improbable.

On the one hand, Mr. Tumen assured the audience that the Uyghur culture is quite distinct and unique and no way related to the Chinese culture. On the other, he said that he has learned the value of cultural diversity since he came to the United States nine years ago. I believe China also recognized the value of diversity. Beijing government’s policy is to allow the fifty plus ethnic minorities to teach their own language alongside putonghua in their schools and to enjoy certain levels of local autonomy in maintaining their daily lives and



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traditions. Of course, if the minority wish to succeed in a Chinese dominated economy, that person must also learn Chinese and understand how to operate in a Chinese society. This is no different from an ethnic minority living in America. That person can no more succeed in the U.S. if the person is unable or unwilling to communicate in English.

Mr. Tumen seemed to believe that in a democracy like the U.S., the Uyghur culture can thrive. Apparently he has not been in America long enough to understand what happened to the many different forms of native American cultures that have been obliterated by actual acts of genocide.

Mr. Tumen also stated that there are 20 million Uyghurs living outside China, implying that they were originally from China. This implication is most misleading. Uyghurs are not just native to the Xinjiang Automomous Region but also in nearby Central Asian countries. If there is a Uyghur diaspora of 20 million, somebody needs to clarify as to what portion have their roots in China and what portion from outside of China.

When we visited Xinjiang, we learned a little about the colorful Uyghur dress, beautifully crafted music instruments to accompany the Uyghur music and dance, Uyghur food and how Uyghur kids are raised. We were not there long enough to detect any racial tension or alienation. After visiting many parts of China with autonomous regions belonging to various ethnic minorities, we did get the impression that the

Chinese government is trying hard to be a nation for all ethnicities.

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George Koo came to the U.S. as a child from China, grew up in Seattle and educated at MIT, Stevens Institute and Santa Clara University. Dr. Koo has recently retired from Deloitte & Touche where he advised clients on their China strategies and business operations. He continues as a special advisor to the Chinese Services Group at Deloitte. Dr. Koo is a frequent speaker in various public forums on China and U.S. China bilateral relations. He writes for Pacific News Service (New America Media) on issues relating to Chinese Americans and to U.S.-China relations. He is a member of Committee of 100 and Pacific Council for International Policy.