

Ethnic Tension in China: From Guangdong to Xinjiang

Written by Linda Benson

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LINDA BENSON, AUG 21 2009

News of mass demonstrations and confrontations with police in China no longer draw attention the way they once did. Every year thousands of such incidents occur as workers face new uncertainties in China's rapidly changing economy. But massive, violent demonstrations driven by ethnic differences and perceived discrimination based on those differences are another matter. The recent clashes between Han Chinese and Uyghurs, in both northwestern China's Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous region and in the southern province of Guangdong, illustrate dramatically the difficulties facing China as the existing chasm between the Han majority and the Uyghur minority deepens.

Ever since the violent events of July 5, 2009, in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital city, the internet has been alive with contradictory accounts, graphic video images, and counter-accusations from each side of the pro- and anti-Chinese divide over the causes and the handling of the July demonstration and its aftermath.

Most sources, even those with vastly different interpretations of events, at least agree that the immediate cause can be traced to southern China, and more specifically to a Shaoguan City toy factory. Late at night on June 25, and continuing into the early morning hours of June 26, a violent brawl began, ultimately involving hundreds of workers. It resulted in 60 Uyghurs, all migrant workers from Xinjiang, being beaten and hospitalized. The number of reported dead varies, but there is general agreement that at least two Uyghur men died outside the factory dormitories.

News of the beatings and killings quickly made its way back to Xinjiang. Many Uyghurs saw video clips on state-run television news showing a mob armed with iron bars beating victims under the street lights. Those who missed the news could see videos of that night's attacks on Youtube and other social network sites where the graphic assaults and inert bodies could be viewed by anyone with an internet connection.

As days passed with no announcement of arrests, anger among Urumqi's Uyghur population grew. A public demonstration began peacefully on Sunday evening, July 5, but it quickly got out of hand. That night and early the next day Han Chinese and Uyghurs died in the ensuing violence. Altogether, nearly 200 people lost their lives and over 1600 were injured. Arrests began the night of July 5; on Monday, July 6, the government news agency, Xinhua, reported 700 detained by authorities; on Tuesday that number reached over 1400.

These events touched off a struggle over interpretation that continues in print and online. Expatriate Uyghurs condemn the killings and deny any part in instigating them. International pro-Tibet supporters denounce the violence, comparing the authorities' crack-down in Urumqi to events in Lhasa prior to the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Human rights organizations across the globe de-cry ethnic conflict in both Chinese borderland regions and place this latest instance in the context of wider human rights violations throughout the PRC.

In response to criticism, Chinese news media blame outside forces for the violence and refer to China's "Muslim terrorists" and links to al-Qaeda in an effort to persuade an international audience of the need for continued Chinese vigilance against international terrorism. Chinese media broadcast dramatic footage of burning vehicles in Urumqi as well as injured Han Chinese bystanders. In a particularly surprising move, authorities in Beijing organized a trip to Xinjiang for foreign journalists who were assured they would be free to interview members of the public during their visit. At the same time, they moved to block internet sites and limit phone access in an effort to re-gain control over the flow of information.

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As interpretations continue to roil internet sites, the basic chronology of events recounted briefly above nonetheless reveals an undeniable difference in local authorities' responses to both instances of ethnically based confrontation. Despite the vaunted power ascribed to the PRC's police and military, the local government in Guangdong was apparently unable, through intent, neglect or incompetence, to respond quickly to a massive, public brawl that led to numerous injuries and two deaths, all captured on incendiary video. Further, that lack of response meant that some of those responsible had time to leave the area. Weeks later, only one man, a Han Chinese, had been detained and charged from among the hundreds of participants captured on video.

In Xinjiang, the authorities' reaction was quite the opposite. There was an immediate deployment of police and military units. Arrests, too, began immediately, and hundreds were detained within days of the incident. Many are reported to be Uyghur, but the government has not released information on the ethnicity of those being held. The contrast between the lack of action in Guangdong and the massive wave of arrests in Xinjiang could not be more extreme.

Questions abound and the answers appear unlikely to flatter the present government. Why didn't the south China authorities make the investigation of the Shaoguan incident a priority? And why, over a month later, is only one single man held on charges resulting from the incident? Could the deaths in Urumqi have been avoided if the government in Guangdong had worked as quickly as the police have in Urumqi to detain those it accuses of instigating violence? Given previous efforts to prevent international news coverage of such events, why did the authorities in Beijing move quickly to facilitate a trip to the region for the international media?

The astounding lack of intervention in the Guangdong case suggests indifference at best to the fate of the vastly outnumbered Uyghur workers and an obvious reluctance to charge their Han Chinese attackers. In contrast, the overwhelming use of force in Urumqi suggests both fear and anger directed at the Uyghurs whose own anger and frustration over the south China incident appears to have been ignored. Undoubtedly, both incidents constitute an enormous setback to China's minority policy and to government efforts at persuading the minority Uyghurs that they are citizens with equal rights in the new China.

About the author:

*Linda Benson, Ph.D., is professor of Chinese history at Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan. She holds a master's degree from the University of Hong Kong and a doctorate from the University of Leeds, England. A specialist in the history of northwestern China, she is the author of several books, including *The Ili Rebellion* (1990), and co-author with Ingvar Svanberg of *China's Last Nomads* (1998), as well as numerous articles and book chapters, many of which focus on Chinese policy toward the Muslim minorities of northwestern China. Her most recent book, *Across China's Gobi*, was published by EastBridge Press in 2008.*