To What Extent has the 'War on Terror' Affected the PRC Government's Handling of the Northwest Uighur Muslim Population and its Campaign for an Independent State of East Turkestan?

"What happened was what always happens when a state, having large-scale military strength, enters into relations with primitive, small peoples, living their own independent life. Under the pretext of self-defence (even though attacks are provoked by the powerful neighbour), or the pretext of civilizing the ways of a savage people (even though the savage people are living a life incomparably better and more peaceable than the civilizers) or else under some other pretext, the servants of large military state commit all sorts of villainy against small peoples, while maintaining that one cannot deal with them otherwise."

(Leo Tolstoy, 1912)

The events of September 11th 2001 (hereafter 9/11) and the ensuing 'War on Terror' had profound ramifications for governments worldwide, influencing both international and domestic policy and engendering a reinvigorating and defining phase in global geopolitics. Within this framework, it is proposed that 9/11 impacted palpably upon the PRC (People's Republic of China) government's policy toward 'its' restive Uighur Turkic Muslim minority in the northwestern border province of Xinjiang. Even before 9/11, minority issues, galvanised by the consequence of violent ethnic partition in socialistYugoslavia and the Soviet Union, had already begun to demand serious consideration inChina (Bulag, 2000: 179). Yet the post 9/11 'War on Terror' atmosphere, infused with its trepidation of terrorism, especially manifested in its Islamic guise, served to advance this tendency further still, principally in Xinjiang.

This paper, in structure, will initially position the Uighur question in the historical context, then analyseBeijing's Uighur policy in the decade preceding 9/11, and subsequently juxtapose this withBeijing's post 9/11 policy. Embedded within the analysis are those internal and external factors that shape PRC policy in Xinjiang. Prior to continuation, I must outline the importance of adopting an impartial approach to this question, uncontaminated by Chinese or Uighur propaganda or imaginative historiographies, and, therefore, sources are appraised with commensurate prudence

(Smith, 2006). Furthermore, the latest 'War on Terror' developments, the inception of civil war inIraqand increased hostility betweenIranand the West, have been disregarded. Although these developments clearly complicateChina's integration into the 'War on Terror' coalition, their implications for Xinjiang are not yet clear.

The Historical Context

Unique Setting

Fig. 1: Xinjiang and her borders (Adapted from www.indiana.edu, 2007)

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Xinjiang, positioned as China's geopolitical "front door" (Lattimore, 1950: vii) to the heartland of Central Asia, borders a group of culturally and historically different countries: Afghanistan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Russia, and Tajikistan(fig. 1). Owing to this dynamic geography, Xinjiang's historic role as a 'convergence point' for these distinct cultural and political currents is readily traceable to the early prominence of the Silk Road. Consequently, the region's Turkic inhabitants, overwhelmingly Uighur, are susceptible to the influence of proximate countries and wider regional activity. The presence of a pro-Soviet "Xinjiang Minority Refugee Army" on Chinese territory during the Sino-Soviet split, in which Soviet and local collusion was implicit, serves to demonstrate this propensity (Millward & Tursun, 2004: 96). Furthermore, according to British Geographer Sir Halford Mackinder (1904), Xinjiang lies within the 'pivot area' of global geopolitics and is of importance in the struggle for global hegemony, owing to its strategic position and abundant resources (fig.2). This geopolitical significance was illustrated by the region's tactical role in the 'Great Game' of 19[th]century Anglo-Russian imperial rivalry (Dillon, 2004: Lattimore, 1950: Tyler, 2003: 70). With these considerations in mind, Chinese governance in Xinjiang has historically precipitated a cyclical policy of assimilation and suppression toward the Uighurs. Indeed Qing rule in Xinjiang, redolent of PRC policy, incorporated methods of coercion, commercial incentives, and a pro-active endorsement of colonial settlement, but frequently employed military force to subjugate the indigenous population (Millward & Perdue, 2004: 57).
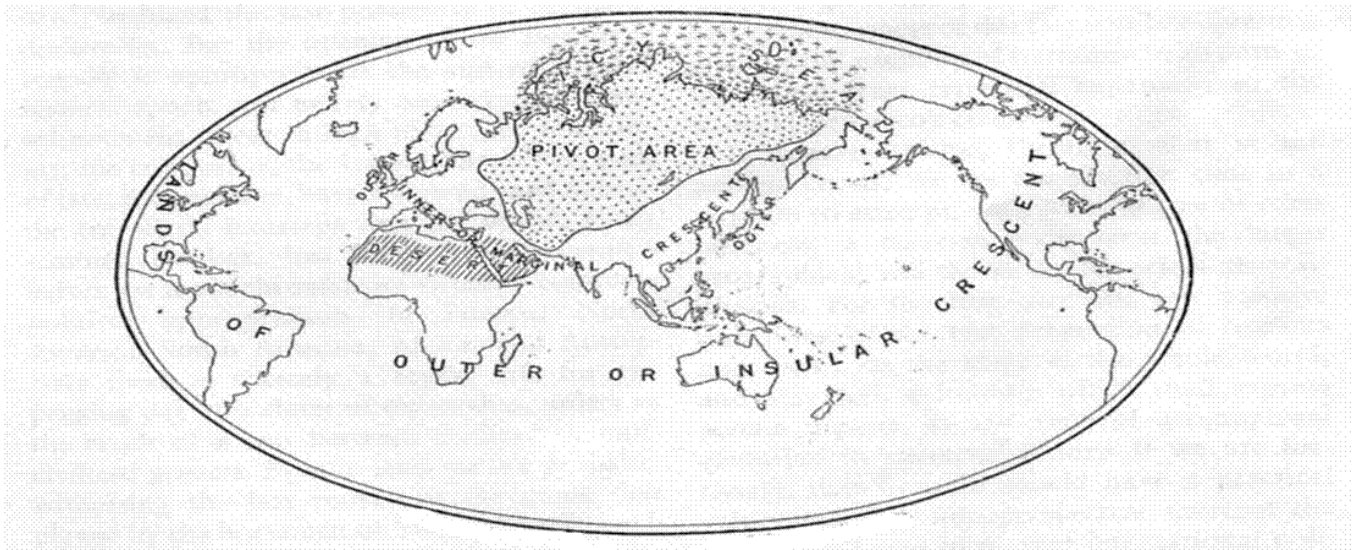
Fig. 2: Mackinder's Geographical Pivot (Adapted from Mackinder, 1904)

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The Political Legacy

It is fundamental to consider the legacy of imperial and socialist minority policies in shaping contemporary PRC policy toward Xinjiang's Uighurs. In order to appease those ethnic minorities, apprehensive of growing Han nationalism, the revolutionised Chinese state ratified decrees in 1911, constitutionalising respect for the cultural and territorial integrity of the five newly-identified nations, which formed the basis of the new state: Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Moslem, and Tibetan (Christiansen and Rai, 1996: 292). Thereafter Chinese minority policy crystallised in the PRC's 'Common Programme', which was ratified on the 29[th]September 1949 and influenced heavily by Marxist-Leninist principles. Criticised by Gladney (2004: 106) for inciting ethnicisation and validating ethnic aspirations in Xinjiang, the 'Common Programme' encouraged minorities to assume regional autonomy with the "freedom to develop their dialects and languages, and to preserve or reform their traditions, customs, and religious beliefs" (Article 53 of the 'Common Programme in Mackerras, 2003: 19). Thereby the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) was inaugurated in 1955.

Xinjiang and the Uighurs before 9/11

The 1990s: A Turbulent Decade

During the 1980s 'Reform Period', Beijingassumed a more accomodationalist and liberal policy toward Xinjiang, increasing the proportion of Uighurs in the local bureaucracy and fostering revivals in traditional Uighur culture and religion. Indeed, for the first time since the Manchu occupation, it was officially accepted that Uighurs were of Turkic derivation (Tyler, 2003: 152). However, the PRC's relaxed and liberal policy served to reignite an independent Uighur spirit, aspiring to delineate itself culturally and politically from Beijing. A young Uighur, Urkesh, even emerged as a leader in the Tiananmen Squareprotests of 1989, illustrating and stimulating this Uighur revivalism (Westerlund & Svanberg, 1999: 207). Against this backdrop, Uighur separatist activity began to rise in Xinjiang culminating in the Baren uprising of 1990, when a group of Uighurs, protesting against PRC birth control policies and nuclear testing in Xinjiang, began to riot. In the brutal crackdown that ensued, twenty-two protestors are believed to have died (official figure), with some witnesses claiming fifty mortalities (Tyler, 2003: 164). External events served to compound Uighur discontent further as the newly-gained independence of the Turkic republics in the former Soviet Union galvanised Uighur aspirations for their own *de jure* independence (Gladney, 2004: Huntingdon, 1996: Mackerras, 2003). Furthermore, the PRC's liberal policies had facilitated the fostering of communication links between Uighurs and their Turkic kinsfolk in Central Asia, allowing recalcitrant notions of Political Islam and Pan-Turkism to permeate Xinjiang (Gladney, 2004: Starr, 2004). Thereon separatist activity and social unrest continued, with serious incidents

occurring in 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996 and 1997 (Haider, 2005: 527).

PRC Policy Prior to 9/11

In attempts to pacify Xinjiang preceding 9/11, an increasingly nationalistic PRC adopted a series of far-reaching policies in the region, divisible into the cultural, economic, military, and political. Beijingincreasingly pursued a clandestine policy to sinicise the Uighur people, relegating the status of Uighur culture, historiography, and language within the education system and the media in an effort to assimilate the Uighurs to the hegemonic Han culture (Dwyer, 2005: 2). Consequently a modern dictionary or encyclopaedia does not exist in the Uighur language, and only a sixth of books published in Xinjiang are available in Uighur (Tyler, 2003: 159). After public outrage at the Chinese book *Xing Fengsu* in 1989, which purportedly denigrated Islam, the PRC, concerned that Islam may incite further separatist sentiment, enforced stricter religious policies (Haider, 2005: 526).Beijing, enshrouded in the Marxist view that "religion is the opium of the people" (Marx in Raines, 2002: 171), banned foreign preachers in Xinjiang, closed underground mosques, and purged believers from state organs. Although the freedom of religious belief is enshrined in the Chinese constitution, Uighur officials in the secret police also infiltrated mosques. Nonetheless,China's Muslims had, by 1998, becomeChina's greatest domestic security concern (Westerlund & Svanberg, 1999: 190).

In a protracted effort to dilute the Uighur population, Beijingincreased its support for further Han migration to Xinjiang, a policy championed by Sun Yat-sen in the 1920s. And in May 1997, the provincial government acknowledged that "several hundred thousand" indigent migrants had arrived in Xinjiang (Provincial Government Spokesperson in Becquelin, 2000: 76). Previously, Kashgar prefecture in Xinjiang's more volatile south had also declared its alacrity in December 1992 to resettle 100,000 Han displaced by the Three Gorges Dam scheme (Dillon, 2004: 75). To avoid fomenting local unrest amongst Uighurs, official figures documenting the precise number of migrants are unattainable. Yet Gilley estimates (2001: 2) that Han Chinese constituted 41% of Xinjiang's population in 2001, compared with just 4% in 1949. Moreover, the PRC launched an ambitious political economy approach to mollify Xinjiang, introducing the 'Develop the West' (*Xibu da Kaifa*) programme in 1999 to attract industry and investment to the disproportionately poor Western provinces. 'Develop the West', forecasted to pump $12 billion into the Xinjiang economy alone (Starr, 2004: 10), undoubtedly provided benefits and jobs for Uighurs but was sharply criticised for prioritising Han economic prosperity and furthering Han immigration (Chung Chien-Peng, 2002: Haider, 2005). Nonetheless,Beijing was adamant that as "the economy develops, the people's focus would gradually shift from religion to the joys of worldly pleasures" (Communist Party Official in Gilley, 2001: 27).

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The most comprehensive military measure prior to 9/11 was the belligerently entitled 'Strike Hard' campaign, a nationwide anti-crime initiative introduced in 1996, which initiated more austere measures against "hooliganism" (Dillon, 2004: 84), including political activism and separatism in Xinjiang. During the first two months of 'Strike Hard', the Xinjiang Public Security Office claimed to have apprehended "2,700 criminals and terrorists" and seized "4,000 sticks of dynamite" and "600 firearms" (Haider, 2005: 527). 'Strike Hard' outlawed religious freedom, sanctioned political executions and torture, and endorsed brutal military methods in suppressing separatist activity. The 1997 uprising in Gulja gained notoriety as police and soldiers allegedly fired on demonstrators and "went through the streets arresting and beating people, including children" (Amnesty International Report inTyler, 2003: 168). In a renewed crackdown following bus bombings inUrumqiandBeijingin 1997, the PRC government dispatched an additional 50-60,000 PLA (People's Liberation Army) troops to Xinjiang under the direct jurisdiction of the Minister of Public Security. The PAP (People's Armed Police) also began conducting extensive anti-guerrilla exercises along the mountainous Kazakh border (Dillon, 2004: 84). In a further move to militarise Xinjiang, the PRC strengthened the paramilitary wing of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, already over 100,000 strong, who were deployed increasingly to enforce order and assist in 'Strike Hard' operations (Becquelin, 2000: 78).

The prolonged insurgency in Xinjiang ensured that greater importance was attached to minority issues inBeijingand the Central Ethnic Work Conference was convened in 1999 exclusively to resolve minority issues. Yet the government still officially strove to obfuscate and downplay the Uighur uprising, utilising the allegiant media to ensure the promulgation of events through an official lens. This would mitigate the criticism of the outside world and also serve to emphasise Xinjiang's apparent stability, so as to attract foreign investment to further the 'Develop the West' initiative. To counteract the Uighur threat further, particularly Uighur support emanating from abroad, Beijing launched a major diplomatic mission in Central Asia, undertaking an instrumental role in establishing the Shanghai G5 (Group of Five) with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 1996. In June 2001, following the admission ofUzbekistanthe Shanghai G5 was renamed the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) and for simplicity, shall be referred to as the SCO throughout this paper. The SCO members agreed to fight "international terrorism, organised crime, arms smuggling, the trafficking of drugs and narcotics, and other transnational activities and not allow their territories to be used for the activities undermining the national sovereignty and social order" (SCO Statement, Almaty, 1998; in Dillon, 2004: 148) of other members and thereby, remove the foreign impetus for Uighur separatism.

9/11 and the Uighurs

The Changing International Context

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The events of 9/11 and the resultant apprehension of (Islamic) terrorism stimulated a revisionist appraisal of separatist movements, particularly those of an Islamic disposition, within the international community. Governments began to view conflicts such as Bosnia, Chechnya, and Xinjiang through the new 'War on Terror' lens, with its requisites of extremism, Islamism, and terrorism, all sustained by a surreptitious and extensive international network. Where the PRC was once criticised by the West for its brutal subjugation of the Uighur population, it was now heralded as a staunch ally, undertaking a fundamental role in combating international terrorism. Beijing and the U.S. even marginalised their antecedent disputes and under the 'War on Terror' banner China, Russia and the U.S. aligned strategically for the first time since World War Two (Mackerras, 2003: 155). Moreover, 9/11 afforded many nations the opportunity to cosy up toChinaeconomically and strengthen bilateral relations, without letting sensitive minority issues impede. Consequently, the PRC possessed a 'freehand' to progress its neo-Imperial objectives ruthlessly and crush the "three evil forces" of extremism, separatism, and terrorism (Mackerras, 2003: 55) in Xinjiang with international acquiescence.

PRC Policy Post 9/11

The events of 9/11 precipitated an even more repressive policy toward religion in Xinjiang. Beijing became increasingly worried about the permeation of radical strains of Islam, such as Wahhabism, the conservative brand of Islam originating from 18th century Saudi Arabia, vilified after 9/11 as an anti-modern 'Islamo-fascist' movement and the "inspiration" for Al-Qaeda (Delong-Bas, 2004: 3). The government began arbitrarily detaining Uighurs suspected of being overly pious (Gladney, 2004b: 393) and accelerated the demolition of 'illegal' mosques from October 2001. Draconian restrictions were also imposed on Islamic traditions such as weddings, funerals, circumcision ceremonies and house-moving ceremonies, whilst local authorities reportedly proscribed the wearing of headscarves and the custom of fasting during Ramadan (Dillon, 2004: 157). However, the PRC had recently forged important diplomatic and commercial relations with Islamic countries, notably Iran and Saudi Arabia, and was, therefore, careful to demonstrate that China's Muslims were not suppressed. This concern ostensibly deterred the PRC from implementing other repressive policies in Xinjiang. Notwithstanding, since 9/11 we have witnessed a fastidious rhetorical campaign to reconfigure the Uighur identity, which has focused on portraying Uighurs as 'terrorists', whilst simultaneously attempting to Islamicise and orientalise them. In early September 2001, the authorities in Xinjiang confidently declared "by no means is Xinjiang a place where violence and terrorist accidents take place very often" (Human Rights Watch 2005, http://www.hrw.org). Yet months later, a Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman asserted, "these people [Uighur] have links with the bin Laden clique and have been infected with the jihad mentality. We should regard cracking down on these terrorists as part of the international struggle against terrorism" (*BBC Online* 2002, http://www.bbc.co.uk). Indeed, since 9/11 Beijing and the Chinese media have sought to associate the

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ethnonym Uighur with terrorism ubiquitously so as to neutralise foreign criticism and reinforce the notion that their subjugation of the Uighur 'terrorists' is an indispensable part of the 'War on Terror' (De Burgh, 2006: Dillon, 2004: Dwyer, 2005: Tyler, 2003). This discourse shift has been facilitated by ignorance in the West about the Uighurs and Chinese geopolitics in general, and legitimised further by Washington's negligent move to categorise the obscure Uighur group ETIM (The East Turkestan Islamic Movement) as a 'terrorist organisation' in August 2002 (Fuller & Lipmann, 2004: Tyler, 2003). Nonetheless, writers such as Chung Chien-Peng (2002) and Schmidt-Hauer (2001) identified the clear distinction between the terms 'separatist' and 'terrorist' and have criticised this opportunistic labelling of the Uighurs. In conjunction with the 'terrorist' discourse, Beijing has sought to utilise Islam's salience in international politics to accentuate the Islamic component of the Uighur movement by linking them to a global Islamic struggle. Thus the role of Uighur fighters in radical Central Asian Islamic groups such as the Taliban, the Pan-Islamic Hizb-al Tahrir al-Islami (Party for Islamic Freedom) and the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) (Haider, 2005: Tyler, 2003) has been vigorously publicised, alongside the Uighur's purported links to Al-Qaeda (Mackerras, 2003: Mackerras, 2004: *The People's Daily* 2002, http://www.people.com.cn). Moreover, the PRC have illuminated and distorted the role of the Uighur Diaspora in conducting terrorist acts abroad, such as the suspected complicity of the Turkish-based 'Organisation for Turkistan Freedom' in bombing the Chinese embassy in Ankara and consulate in Istanbul in 1997 (Chung Chien-Peng, 2002: 3). Furthermore, by 'Islamicising' the Uighurs, the PRC has embarked on a domestic campaign to distance and 'exoticise' the Uighurs (Baranovitch, 2003) inducing 'orientalist' discourses, which associate the Uighurs and Islam with barbarity and "primitivity" (Said in Bayoumi & Rubin, 2000: 175) and thus, justify 'their' subjugation in order to safeguard Han civilisation.

In economic terms, though marginalised by political concerns, PRC policy has been largely unchanged following 9/11. The 'Develop the West' campaign has undoubtedly slowed with tourism revenue and foreign investment decreasing in Xinjiang as it becomes more problematic, and incongruous to PRC propaganda, for Beijing to advertise Xinjiang as a stable region (Gladney, 2004b: 395). However, 'Develop the West' is still considered pivotal as a long-term strategy in countering separatism through economic prosperity (Dillon, 2004: 158). After 9/11, Han immigration to Xinjiang has continued unabated, maintaining an important role in diluting the Uighur presence and altering Xinjiang's demography to the "favour of ethnic Chinese" (Turkel 2003, http://www.cecc.gov).

The overwhelming approval of the international community after 9/11 has allowed Beijing to renew its belligerent 'Strike Hard' campaign, and has removed the need for the comparatively deferential rhetoric of combating 'hooliganism' or political activism in exchange for the manifest intention of combating religious-inspired international terrorism. By accentuating the Uighur threat to "social stability in China" and "related regions" (Information Office of the State Council in Haider, 2005: 531), the PRC was able to adopt ever more repressive measures and commit

frequent human rights transgressions. Indeed on 26thSeptember 2001, two-dozen Muslim prisoners were openly displayed and two abruptly executed (Shichor, 2004: 120). In addition, the PRC further increased its military presence in Xinjiang, deploying fighter aircraft, air-defence missiles, helicopters, and anti-chemical warfare units to Xinjiang immediately after 9/11, adopting the Clausewitzian view that "all forces that are available and destined for a strategic object should be simultaneously applied to it" (Clausewitz, 1997: 182). Border security in Xinjiang has also been tightened, with Pakistani and Uighur traders complaining about harassment from Chinese border officials and tourists unable to access certain regions such as theKhunjerabPass.

In stark contrast to pre 9/11 policy, the PRC has exhibited a greater openness in publicising, albeit partially, the destabilising events in Xinjiang so as to gratify international support for its own 'War on Terror', even to the detriment of its economic programme in Xinjiang. In 2002, Beijingreleased a detailed report documenting 200 'terrorist' incidents in Xinjiang over the last decade, which resulted in 162 deaths and 440 injuries (Mackerras, 2003: 51). Simultaneously, Beijingworked to silence the dissemination of events from the Uighur perspective, and blocked numerous Uighur websites (Gladney, 2004b: 385). Furthermore, with regards to PRC foreign policy, 9/11 served to reinvigorate the SCO, whose members, increasingly apprehensive of the spectre of Islamic Fundamentalism in the region, signed an initiative to strengthen their friendship. On 14th November 2001, China presented to the SCO a list of ten Central Asian organisations accused of supporting Uighur separatists (Fuller & Lipman, 2004: 342), whilst the SCO promptly established an anti-terrorist centre in Kyrgyzstan after their June 2002 summit (Akbarzadeh, 2005: 50). The 'War on Terror' also signalled the arrival of theU.S. military in Central Asia, causing concern inBeijing that theU.S., in a wider geopolitical manoeuvre against the PRC, may actually encourage separatism in Xinjiang. This apprehension was largely evoked by events in 1949 whenU.S. connivance was suspected in organising ethnic groups to oppose communism in Xinjiang (Shichor, 2004: 127). Consequently an anxious PRC began to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy in the region after 9/11.China asked its long-standing allyPakistan to apply its influence with the Taliban to reign in Uighur activity inAfghanistan, whilst successfully enforcing the extradition and 'repatriation' of Uighurs fromNepal,Pakistan, and several SCO countries (Human Rights Watch 2005, http://www.hrw.org).

Conclusion

It would be premature to dismiss 9/11 and the events of the 1990s as a cyclical crackdown in Xinjiang with the customary détente to soon follow. Of greater certainty, is the role of 9/11 as a paradisiacal event in vindicating China's increasingly repressive policies in Xinjiang before the international community. 9/11 has allowed Beijingto repackage its neo-Imperial conquest of the Uighurs as an indispensable component of the 'War on Terror' and the

fight of the 'civilised' world against the 'barbarity' of terrorism. Beijinghas capitalised on the Islamophobic sentiment in the West and the anxious 'War on Terror' atmosphere to create its own 'War *of* Terror' in Xinjiang with international approval. In such a climate, Tolstoy's foreword, written over a century ago in condemnation of Tsarist Russia's colonial conquest of the Chechens, appears just as pertinent today in describing the brutality of the Chinese state and its abuse of sovereignty in Xinjiang. The PRC has used 9/11 as a catalyst to usher in more intrusive and repressive policies in Xinjiang, particularly toward religion and individual freedom, whilst adopting increasingly brutal military measures to suppress Uighur separatism. To a significant extent, we have also witnessed the increased politicisation of the Uighur issue, as more bellicose policies, both at home and abroad, begin to overshadow the 'carrots' offered by comparatively benign economic campaigns such as 'Develop the West'. Previous policies intended to integrate the Uighur population into Chinese society seem a distant reverie, asBeijing pursues a relentless and indiscriminate campaign post 9/11 further to isolate and to 'other' the Uighurs. This has focused to a large extent on accentuating the 'orientalist' and Islamic discourse and popularising the contention, through manipulative rhetoric and reportage, that all Uighurs are 'terrorists'. Indeed Haider (2005: 544) forewarns that "China's draconian policies to combat these 'terrorists' may well polarise moderate Uighurs and create the very problem they are aimed at "solving". In a more profound abstraction, the increasingly violent subjugation of the Uighurs following 9/11 brings to the fore Buruma's apocalyptic vision that as Chinese dynasties approach their end "corrupt officials, whose authority can no longer rely on the assumption of superior virtue, exercise their power with anxious and arbitrary brutality" (Buruma, 2001: xiii).

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Written by: Ben Mackenzie-Grieve
Written at: Nottingham University