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# **Models of conflict**

## **The case of Xinjiang, China**

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## Summary

The conflict between Han Chinese 'settlers' and 'indigenous' Uyghur inhabitants of China's westernmost province, Xinjiang, is oftentimes explained by the dominance over and suppression of the later by the former; the ruling Han and the oppressed Uyghur.

Economic arguments – rural underdevelopment, economic oppression and resource extraction by the Han, and suppression of Uyghur entrepreneurship – hold sway in these accounts of the conflict. The economic argument is heard in the official account of the Chinese government and as a result of the lack of other voices, such as those from people on the ground, the (western) media copy this argument as their explanation of ethnic tensions in Xinjiang. The solution of the Chinese government is the implementation of positively discriminative policies in family planning and education, and introducing quotas on the number of ethnic minority people employed within state-owned enterprises. Yet these policies have failed, as is shown by the violent ethnic clashes in Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang province, in July of this year. I contend that the economic argument is just one aspect of the explanation of ethnic tensions in Xinjiang, and that solutions to the conflict should address other aspects as well.

In this paper I intend to identify models, drawn from other areas of inquiry, that can help to highlight other aspects of the explanation of ethnic conflict in western China, such as social, cultural and religious ones. The question that will be addressed in this paper is the following: 'Can models of identity and development tell us something about the nature of conflict in developmental states, with particular reference to ethnic conflict in Xinjiang, China?' If these alternative domains prove a useful hunting ground for new models of conflict in Xinjiang – and I contend that they are – then they may well be appropriate in other conflict situations as well.

This essay is structured as follows: I will first provide an overview of the literature from which I draw alternative models. In each case I will show the relevance of these models to the study of conflict in Xinjiang, China. I will then apply these models to my case study of ethnic conflict in Xinjiang, drawing extensively from opinion pieces in the popular media by established academics, published with reference to the recent ethnic violence in Ürümqi. In conclusion I will try to generalise my findings on the applicability of models taken from different fields of inquiry.

## Overview of the literature

In this essay I will take an approach as in a working paper. I will review several concepts taken from the literature, use these concepts in the context of conflict, and apply them (in a later section) to my analysis of discourse on one particular conflict: ethnic tensions in Xinjiang, China. These concepts seem promising for my analysis at the outset but may or may not prove fruitful upon further investigation of this and other conflicts. I will draw the following concepts into my argument on models of conflict in Xinjiang: *hybridity* (Ang, 2003), *vernacular models* (Dove and Kammen, 2001), *tribal slot and tribal elder* (Li, 2000; Tsing, 1999), *developmental state politics* (Potter, 2000).

### *Hybridity*

Ang (2003: 141), who postulates the concept to go “beyond diaspora”, defines hybridity as follows:

*“... unlike other key concept in the contemporary politics of difference – such as diaspora and multiculturalism – it [hybridity] foregrounds complicated entanglement rather than identity, togetherness-in-difference rather than separateness and virtual apartheid” (Ang, 2003: 141).*

Much has been made of hybridity in juxtaposition to transnationalism <sup>1</sup>. I would like to instead focus on this opposition of hybridity and diaspora. Membership of a diaspora foregrounds identification with one imagined community, such as the Chinese diaspora (Liu, 2005 and McKeown, 2006), to the detriment of identification with another community, such as one’s nationality – e.g. (Asian/Chinese) American. Hybridity focusses instead on one’s personal navigation of borders between, and complex identification with different communities. A member of the Chinese diaspora in the United States can at the same time feel Chinese and American, and at different times and for different reasons feel a greater sense of belonging to China or America.

I contend that issues of hybridity are relevant within the border of a nation as well. Somebody from Leeuwarden can at different times and for different reasons identify him or herself as a Frisian or a Dutchman. Rudelson (1997) has researched such group identification among members of the Uyghur ethnic minority in the oasis town of Turpan, in northeastern Xinjiang. Social group identity is complicated among the Uyghurs <sup>2</sup>. It suffices

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<sup>1</sup> See Kivisto (2001), discussed by Nootboom et al (personal communication) during the lecture on Thursday, 15 October 2009.

<sup>2</sup> A history of Xinjiang is useful in this regard. See Millward (2007) for a comprehensive history of this region.

to say that Rudelson investigated how Uyghurs straddle the borders between *Jonggolūq* (Chinese), *Uyghur*, *Turpanlik* (from Turpan), *Muslim*, and *Turk* identity. I have reproduced his results in table 1.

<b>Social group</b>	<b>1 – most frequent</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 – least frequent</b>
<b>Peasants</b>	Muslim	Uyghur	Turpanlik	Jonggolūq	Turk
<b>Merchants</b>	Jonggolūq	Turpanlik	Uyghur	Muslim	Turk
<b>Intellectuals</b>	Turk	Uyghur	Turpanlik	Muslim	Junggolūq

*Table 1: "Self-Definition by social group", taken from Rudelson (1997: 118).*

Several things become immediately clear from this table. First is the enormous differences in hybrid identities between different social strata. Bellér-Hann (2002) reinforces this point in his study of inter- and intra-ethnic identity construction in Xinjiang by means of dress-code, diet, occupation, education, et cetera. Second is the strong muslim identity among peasants and weak muslim identity among merchants and intellectuals. Resistance against anti-religious policy will most strongly be felt on the countryside. Third, merchants are unlikely to be the instigators of inter-ethnic violence, as they identify strongly with China. Chinese society provides them with opportunities for entrepreneurship. Fourth, pan-Turkic sentiments are an exclusively intellectual exercise. Suppression of expressions of ethnic culture is most likely to encounter hostility among the intellectual elite. This social stratification among the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, and the differences in identity construction between these social strata, tells us something about likely differences in vernacular models of conflict in Xinjiang. Vernacular models are the next topic of this literature review.

### *Vernacular models*

The study of vernacular models is concerned with government policy and local interpretations. The interaction between stated intentions – the official model or discourse – and the local interpretation and implementation of such policy yields vernacular discourses. Vernacular models are essentially a means of taking a bottom-up look at practices which are typically analysed in a top-down fashion. ‘Quotidian practices’ – in top-down analyses often ignored as external to the discourse – take a central position in bottom-up analyses. Jackson (1984, quoted in Dove and Kammen, 2001: 620) first noticed such vernacular models in the context of ‘vernacular landscapes’, which I assume to be something like the illegal-but-licit borderlands of Abraham and van Schendel (Abraham

2006: 1). Dove and Kammen (2001) apply such vernacular models to their case study of development in Indonesia. It is my intention to take such vernacular models to the domain of conflict studies and show interactions between stated government policy and its final interpretations and outcomes.

What vernaculars can we reasonably expect to identify in the case of Xinjiang? Firstly, there are the state vernaculars. These aren't the same as the official model. One vernacular is that of the idealised state, a "giving state in the role of benign donor of resources" (Dove and Kammen, 2001: 620); of the Chinese state bringing economic development to Xinjiang. There's at least one other state vernacular, of civil servants that don't see the intended results – namely a reduction of unrest and violence in Xinjiang – and are calling for tougher action to what they see as expressions of Uyghur nationalism and separatism<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, we can reasonably expect to find at least three Uyghur vernaculars based on the Uyghur social groups identified in the previous section. As I have already hinted at, these groups are likely to respond differently to different parts of government policy in Xinjiang. Thirdly, the vernacular of the Han population has, until recently, been extremely under-pronounced. One possible explanation is given by Thum (2009), who sees in the recent riots in Ürümqi the first ethnic spillover of violence. Thum claims that, until July of this year, Uyghur discontent has always been aimed at the government, not at the local Han population. This 'ethnicisation' of the conflict has caused a reconfiguration of the Han, and possibly of the Uyghur, vernacular. Finally, there are of course the usual suspects: the vernaculars of the international media, of NGOs and human rights activists, of international political bodies, et cetera. Insofar as these vernaculars are irrelevant to my argument I will not deal with them here.

### *Tribal slots and the tribal elder*

Models of tribal slots (Li, 2000) and tribal elders (Tsing, 1999) can help shed some light on the complex interactions between vernaculars. Specifically the tribal slot can help identify *what* is articulated whereas the social space of the tribal elder can identify *who* articulates this tribal slot. In the Chinese context Li's tribes are more appropriately identified as ethnic minorities whereas Tsing's tribal elders are the community representatives for ethnic minorities on the (inter-)national stage. I would similarly like to discard the (romantic) myth

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<sup>3</sup> 'Intended results' are, of course, in the eye of the beholder. This state vernacular receives very little attention in the international media in order to "remove the appearance of politics from what is inevitably a highly politicized field" (Dove and Kammen, 2001: 621). In other words, the government doesn't want attention to be drawn to these internal struggles.

of green development fantasies and instead introduce the (romantic to some) idea of violently oppressed ethnic minorities.

The occupation of a tribal slot is the articulation of a positioning vis-à-vis the Indonesian government in the competition for (forest) resources. Such a positioning is:

*“not natural or inevitable, but neither is it simply invented, adopted or imposed. It [...] draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle”* (2000: 151).

The question is then what causes a tribe to position itself in opposition to the government, and how this opposition is articulated? In the case of the Lindu tribe on Sulawesi (Li, 2000: 163) the root cause of this positioning is the dam project of lake Lindu, and the articulation is an instantiation of the green development myth. Similarly, when the Chinese government introduced a discourse of development of the nation, the most underdeveloped areas of the country were portrayed as backward. The ethnic minorities that inhabit these regions are characterised as primitive, uncivilised, and culturally regressive. In opposition to this narrative, representatives of these ethnic minorities articulated a discourse of ethnic pride and cultural independence, and the developmental Chinese state became the suppressor of expressions of local culture and ethnic identity<sup>4</sup>. It is striking that culture and ethnicity in China is often expressed in the same way as tribal identity in Indonesia according to Li, namely through “song, dance and handicraft” (2000: 161) as well as “‘traditional’ costumes, major annual feasts, and marriage arrangements” (2000: 165).

Who articulates this position in the case of the Uyghurs? Tsing (1999: 162) suggests that such community representatives – tribal elders in her own terminology – are such people that can convincingly act as a medium between the ethnic minority (tribe) and the world at large. To that aim they should have some contacts with the ruling elite, connections with international organisations, or influence at the governmental level. For a community representative to flourish a “field of attraction must be created to nurture and maintain the relationship between the rural [ethnic] community and its experts” (Tsing, 1999: 162). In the Chinese context the Dalai Lama has been particularly successful into filling this social

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<sup>4</sup> I believe this argument comes to the same conclusion as does Bertrand (2004) in his historical institutionalist approach. Bertrand argues that national models and institutions allow for certain positionings between (ethnic) groups or vis-à-vis the government to be formed. In Bertrand’s argument critical junctures provide opportune moments for articulation of such positionings.

space as the community representative for the Tibetans. He has been so successful even, that the idea of the ‘violently oppressed ethnic minority’ won’t need further introduction. Is it possible to find someone that occupies the same social space representing the Uyghurs? Looking at Rudelson’s social strata introduced earlier, we are unlikely to find such a person among the peasants; they don’t have the appropriate connections outside of the local community. Merchants disqualify themselves as they identify too closely with the governmental narrative of development, not with ethnic pride and cultural independence. Only an intellectual could successfully nurture and maintain the right relationships both within and without the community. Yet Rebiya Kadeer <sup>5</sup>, the only person who claims to represent the Uyghurs on the international stage, comes from a merchant background. Due to this ambiguous – i.e. as a merchant-entrepreneur – claim for the position of tribal elder, she has met with varying success in gaining attention for the Uyghur cause. I will examine her role as a ‘tribal elder’ in greater detail in the case study.

### *Developmental state politics*

There is only enough space to pay cursory attention to the relevance of developmental state politics in articulating government vernaculars on ethnic conflict in China. In particular, government legitimization of suppression of alternative and dissident voices for the benefit of sustained economic development (Potter, 16: 2000) has some relevance with regard to the concerns of ethnic minorities in China. Indeed, part of why vernacular models of conflict are so difficult to identify from outside of the country is just because the developmental government only allows articulation of the official model of conflict. In the case of Xinjiang, development removes “the appearance of politics from what is inevitably a highly politicized field” (Dove and Kammen, 2001: 621), namely the cultural homogenisation of this ethnically diverse area. Alternative, vernacular models are, sometimes violently, suppressed for the benefit of sustained economic growth.

### **Case study: ethnic conflict in Xinjiang, China**

So far this essay has drawn extensively from models of identity and development to suggest approaches by which to study ethnic conflict. As I postulated various approaches to studying conflict I drew freely from the Uyghur context in Xinjiang, China, but so far I haven’t rooted my argument in any particular set of events. This part of the paper sets out to do just that; to look at the ethnic rioting that took place in Ürümqi, capital of Xinjiang

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<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to Rebiya Kadeer, her history as an Uyghur entrepreneur in China, how she fell foul of the Chinese government and now lives in exile, fighting for the Uyghur cause from the United States, please see Millward (2007: 357).

province, in July of this year. In my account I have no intention of providing a comprehensive analysis of recent events but merely wish to highlight some aspects of the conflict which I think can effectively be analysed with the models that were provided earlier. Before proceeding with my analysis I will first provide a brief summary of events that took place in Ürümqi in the first week of July.

### *Ethnic conflict in Ürümqi*

Terrorism in Xinjiang, generally linked to Uyghur separatism, has occasionally surfaced since the founding of communist China. Bus bombings sporadically shook the far-western reaches of the Chinese nation, and as recently as 1997 a government crackdown of protests in Ghulja resulted in an unknown number of deaths. In the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics several terrorist attacks took place, aimed at government institutions in Kashgar and Kuqa, presumably to draw international attention to the Uyghur cause. Yet the consensus is that Uyghur separatist factions play only a marginal role in the lives of the vast majority of Uyghur and other inhabitants of Xinjiang.

All of that changed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2009, when the worst ethnic violence in the recorded history of this westernmost part of the People's Republic took place. Contrary to outbursts of violence in the past, which had always been aimed at the Chinese state, Uyghur mobs randomly attacked innocent Han civilians on the streets of Ürümqi (Thum, 2009). Windows were smashed, cars and busses set on fire, and men, women and children clubbed to death in the late afternoon on Sunday. Riot police eventually restored peace in what is usually described as the Uyghur part of town. Yet the police couldn't prevent retributions from taking place. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of July, before the army had taken control of the city, Han Chinese inhabitants of Ürümqi took to the streets with makeshift weapons, indiscriminately targeting Uyghur property and people in revenge of the killings of two days earlier. The official number of victims on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July is 198, mostly Han Chinese. There is no consensus on the number of deaths two days later. The Han deny that anyone died on the 7<sup>th</sup> but Uyghur estimates run as high as 2,000. Since the 7<sup>th</sup> of July the army has remained in control of the city whilst interethnic suspicions and occasional localised assaults between members of the various ethnic groups remain widespread. The immediate cause of the violence is often traced back to unrest at a factory employing Uyghur people in Shaoguan, Guangdong, in southeast China (Eunjung Cha, 2009). A primer on the Ürümqi riots is provided in the bibliography.

### *Islamic fundamentalism, an ignored spectre in the Xinjiang riot?*

In response to the July 2009 riots, academics such as Zheng (2009) have highlighted the role of Islamic fundamentalism in the ethnic tensions in Xinjiang. Zheng considers Islamic identity to be an ignored aspect of the violence. Drawing from my analysis of Uyghur identity at the beginning of this essay, I will attempt to answer the following questions: where are we most likely to encounter a religious vernacular in response to government development policies, and did such a vernacular play a role in the events on July the 5<sup>th</sup>?

It has been shown earlier (table 1) that muslim identity is strongest among the Uyghur peasant population of rural Xinjiang. This is also the area where the government encounters the strongest opposition to anti-religious policy, such as bans on fasting during the Ramadan for government officials and students. Expressions of traditional muslim identity, such as a strict adherence to the five daily prayers and the wearing of full veil (qūmbal) for women, is most widespread in the rural south of Xinjiang province (Bellér-Hann, 2002: 68). Therefore, a strongly Islamic, anti-government vernacular is most likely to surface in these areas of Xinjiang. Zheng very much agrees on these points. The urban intellectual elite is much more likely to express their Uyghur identity by cultural instead of religious means, such as references to ethnic dance, music and history. If it can be shown that the peasant population played an important role in the July riots, then Zheng can plausibly argue that religious identity has played a role in the ethnic violence that took place in Ürümqi. But evidence to that aim is quite limited. The first people that took to the streets were Uyghur students from Xinjiang University in Ürümqi, the province's most prestigious academic institution. Other people later came to their support, and Zheng alleges that:

*“people on the street that day sounded different because they spoke Uyghur with the accents of southern Xinjiang. [...] they also behaved in a way that suggests their fundamentalist beliefs when they roughed up Uyghur women merely because those women were wearing skirts and sleeveless shirts” (Zheng, 2009).*

Yet his arguments are based on anecdotal evidence, as both Elltiott (2009) and Millward (quoted in Claus, 2009) point out <sup>6</sup>. Numerous other sources seem to indicate an escalation of a peaceful protest by Uyghur intellectuals to demand tougher actions against the perpetrators of the Shaoguan incident earlier that month. I therefore disagree with

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<sup>6</sup> In such cases the Chinese government is also usually quick to point out links to Islamic fundamentalist and extremist organisations, as it hopes to gather international support for their policy of assimilation in Xinjiang.

Zheng. Rural peasants did not play a major role in the July riots, and I'm of the opinion that Islamic fundamentalism is rightfully ignored as a spectre in the Ürümqi riots.

*Economic development brings peace and prosperity*

Inclusion into the developmental effort by means of economic incentives is the official model for the autonomous regions on the fringes of contemporary China – of which Xinjiang is but one example. Regional underdevelopment was therefore one of the first factors that the government identified as a cause of the July 2009 riots. Propaganda campaigns following the riots paid enormous attention to stories of economic prosperity by successful Uyghur entrepreneurs (People's Daily, 2009<sup>7</sup>). Yet the people of Xinjiang don't attribute these successes to the economic development of the autonomous region. This fact is highlighted by the following quote:

*“The two major policies that benefit minorities alone – exceptions to the one-child policy and lower university admission standards for students who did not attend Chinese-language schools – stoke Han resentment” (Thum 2009).*

Thum, talking about the ethnicisation of discontent in Xinjiang, rightfully points out that ethnic discontent has never before been aimed at the Han population of Xinjiang (see also Weston, 2009). Yet inter-ethnic tensions, such as Han resentment about positive discrimination of Uyghurs, have always been lurking under the surface. The violence aimed at innocent members of the Han population of Ürümqi on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July merely provided the final straw and caused Han mobs to seek revenge two days later. Such is, in my opinion, the Han vernacular in response to official models of development of the autonomous regions.

As Millward (2009) points out, Uyghur vernaculars in response to government policy consider it equally unfavourable. Positive discrimination of members of the Uyghur minority, an example of a quotidian practice, has done little to reduce prejudices about the Uyghur among the Han population of Xinjiang. Prejudices have instead become more widespread by such misguided policy. Similarly, job prospects are still heavily stacked in favour of the Han. In return for this 'facade' of involving the Uyghur population in the development effort, the government gets access to Xinjiang's vast amounts of natural

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<sup>7</sup> “True Xinjiang”, by People's Daily (2009), is still the only English language website that can be accessed from within Xinjiang following the crackdown on communications after the riots. People's Daily is a Chinese news publisher that submits to heavy state censorship. At any one time it is running several such stories of successful Uyghur entrepreneurs.

resources. Instead of an exclusively economic model of development. Uyghurs would much prefer to be granted economic, cultural and religious freedom in equal parts.

### *Rebiya Kadeer: tribal elder or wronged entrepreneur?*

When tensions arise in Tibet, the Chinese government is quick to blame the Dalai Lama and his 'clique'. From his residence in Dharamsala in northern India the Dalai Lama still commands an enormous following across the border in Tibet. Similarly, the Chinese government usually blames Rebiya Kadeer, an exiled Uyghur entrepreneur, head of the World Uyghur Congress, living in the United States, for instigating ethnic unrest in Xinjiang wherever it surfaces<sup>8</sup>. But does Rebiya Kadeer command a similar amount of respect among the Uyghur population of Xinjiang? In other words, did she successfully occupy the tribal elder slot during the violence in July?

She has certainly tried to act as the community representative or spokesperson during the riots earlier this year. She occupied a prominent place in the international media as events were taking shape in Ürümqi. Yet it was argued earlier that a community representative maintains relationships with both experts and the local community. In my experience Rebiya Kadeer does not meet the latter requirement. Elliott (2009) agrees, as he finds no evidence for the involvement of Rebiya Kadeer in the July unrest. I believe that the reason for her failure to represent the Uyghur population of Xinjiang lies in the fact that she comes from a merchant background. She is not the right person to effectively articulate the positioning of the Uyghur peasants and intellectuals. She rose to prominence as the head of a business empire operating from Ürümqi and was eventually appointed to the CPPCC and the NPC<sup>9</sup>. After lobbying for greater cultural freedoms on behalf of the Uyghurs she was imprisoned and eventually exiled to the United States. Because she has in the past identified too closely with the government vernacular of economic development, she never gathered strong support among the Uyghur population of Xinjiang. Her links to Uyghur separatist organisations are all very tentative, and the claim that she was involved in the Ürümqi riots is equally tentative as well.

### *Worse is yet to come*

The final and most speculative part of this analysis of the Ürümqi riots is about the effects they've had on government vernaculars. Preciously little is known about government

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<sup>8</sup> So also in July; another look at True Xinjiang (People's Daily, 2009), for recent stories on Rebiya Kadeer and her family, is revealing in this regard as well.

<sup>9</sup> *Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and National People's Congress.*

proceedings and attitudes among officials. It's been pointed out to me that the lobby for a tougher attitude vis-à-vis ethnic minorities, and swifter crackdowns on protests and expressions of minority nationalism, is quickly gaining more momentum in the Beijing bureaucracy. As China can afford a more bullish attitude on the world stage it will similarly be more unconcerned with international opinion about the way in which Beijing handles its internal affairs. As a authoritarian, developmental state China feels entitled to dismiss concerns about cultural suppression and ethnic assimilation in favour of swift economic development of its underdeveloped regions. The Chinese government made a surprising move by providing foreign journalists with unusual levels of access to the worst hit areas of Ürümqi but this attitude could equally well have bent over in the opposite direction. As unrest becomes more widespread, so the government response will be that much more difficult to predict. Xinjiang is likely to continue to be of concern to the Chinese state and the international community for some time to come.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I set out to show that models of identity and development can tell us something about the nature of conflict in developmental states. I believe I have convincingly argued that such models can indeed help deconstruct conflict. I did so by showing that several aspects of the Uyghur context and the July 2009 Ürümqi riots can successfully be analysed using concepts such as hybrid and tribal identity, and official and vernacular models taken from the literature on identity and development in Indonesia. I've taken an approach as in a working paper; in my analysis of the conflict in Xinjiang I have been far from exhaustive. But then I didn't mean to provide a thorough analysis of the situation in Xinjiang; instead I believe this essay shows promising directions for future research into the situation of the Uyghur population in western China. I will leave this topic by saying something about the universal applicability of the approaches that were considered. As such models are successfully applied to conflict in Xinjiang, I have no reason to believe that they can't be applied elsewhere. I have already suggested that the social space of tribal elder or community representative can equally well be applied to the position of the Dalai Lama. I believe that such approaches may just as well travel across the borders of the Chinese nation and be applied to conflict in other parts of the world.

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## **A primer on the July 2009 Ürümqi riots <sup>10</sup>**

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<sup>10</sup> These articles consist of opinion pieces by well-established scholars on Xinjiang, personal experiences and eye-witness accounts, and newspaper articles on key events in the Ürümqi riots.