Uighur protests concern Beijing more because of their organization than their size.

O VER the past ten years, Uighurs in Xinjiang province have expressed their dissatisfaction with Chinese rule through bombings, riots, and attacks on government facilities. The Uighurs are a Turkic ethnic minority concentrated in northwestern China, along the border with Kazakhstan. The Uighur resistance falls into two categories: episodic unrest and insurgent activity. It is Uighur insurgent activities that many Western observers have in mind when discussing China’s tribulations in Xinjiang. However, the Chinese government is also concerned about episodic resistance, which includes riots and protest demonstrations, with or without visible leaders, and is often, but not always, localized. This article focuses on the periodic waves of unrest that have wracked Xinjiang and considers the question of why some protest demonstrations have escalated into violent riots.¹

Adapting “Rightful Resistance”

The literature on state-society relations in rural China has seen a recent surge in scholarship on peasant resistance.² The concept of “rightful resistance,” a term coined by Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, is often used to frame the debate.³ Rightful resisters typically exploit the gap between the center’s policies and promises and their implementation by local governments. They try to shame local officials by publicly demanding that they follow the center’s pronouncements. In this sense, the resisters accept the authority of the center but not of its local representatives. They skirt the line between political participation and resistance, publicly acknowl-
edging the legitimacy of the center in order to gain allies. According to O’Brien, “Rightful resistance is thus a product of state building and of opportunities created by the spread of participatory ideologies and patterns of rule rooted in notions of equality, rights, and rule of law.” Rightful resisters display a sense of “rights consciousness” and use “rights talk” to back up their demands for the redressing of specific wrongs. The public adoption of this attitude makes it difficult for the authorities to crack down on them without being accused of hypocrisy.

Leaving aside the question of whether the concept of rightful resistance is applicable to the Uighur protests, certain insights drawn from this idea help to explain the course the protests have taken. As will be shown, it is not that the Uighur demonstrators discussed in this article are engaged in rightful resistance that degenerates into violence, but rather that they are unable to successfully utilize the tools associated with rightful resistance. Specifically, the article focuses on two aspects of rightful resistance: a perception that the state is disaggregated, and a set of grievances that can be portrayed as legitimate to the central authorities. When both of these aspects are present, the resisters, in a series of repeated petitions, go step by step up the state hierarchy to demand that local leaders properly implement central policies, and they accord legitimacy to state units that respond positively to these demands.

There are several reasons why some elements of the rightful resistance concept cannot be applied to the violent Uighur protest demonstrations. To begin with, O’Brien’s theory focuses primarily on rural areas. Protests by urban workers are often directed at their employer, the company (or company official) that has wronged them, and therefore are limited in nature and scope. Rural protesters, on the other hand, tend to protest primarily against the local government. The members of a protesting group may have individual complaints, but they engaged in a common cause because they live in the same geographical area and have similar relationships with the local government. In this sense, the Uighurs discussed in this article, although urbanized, are more similar to rural protesters than urban workers. The Uighurs, even those who may be workers, are not protesting against a company, and in any case the issue of their status as workers is not germane to the incidents described here.

One could argue that the confrontational posture taken by Uighur petitioners in the examples recounted below explains why the protests escalated into violence. But the initial attitudes of the Uighur demonstrators were similar to what O’Brien and Li have termed “direct rightful resistance,” which does not necessarily lead to violence, because the petitioners are still appealing to the legitimacy of some level of the state. Here, legitimacy is not static but instrumental, conditional on a given state actor responding adequately to the petitioners’ concerns. It is helpful to think of rightful resistance as consisting of repeated petitions rather than a single event. All petitioners ask for redress at least once. The issue is what happens when their petition, broadly defined, is rejected. In O’Brien and Li’s Han peasant application of rightful resistance, the aggrieved party appeals to a higher level if a petition is rejected. In the case of the Uighur petitioners, rejection often leads to violence. Most news accounts focus on the rioting—how many people were killed, how many buildings were destroyed, what cities were closed off, and the separatist claims espoused once the riot began—making it difficult to tease out how the protest that led to the riot actually began. Although it is possible that some incidents began with separatist claims, demands for independence do not appear to have been the factor causing the protests in the incidents described here—they appeared after the initial demands were rejected.

Some analysts might suggest that Uighur protests turn violent so quickly because the participants are not Han Chinese. This is an unsatisfactory approach inasmuch as it does nothing to explain how the protests degenerate into violence or why there is a difference in this respect between Uighurs and Hans (and other minority nationalities). Muslim resisters generally know how to use the symbols, policies, and commitments of the state to obtain the support of higher authorities against their
local antagonists. And they certainly know how to appeal to the center when the grievance is a direct result of an insult to Islam. The Chinese government has a complicated relationship with the country’s Muslims, but since 1979 it has allowed (some would say encouraged) a resurgence in the practice of Islam to appease and better control the large Muslim community. At the same time, it has cracked down on any activity or institution, such as religious schools, that could conceivably radicalize Muslims or organize resistance to the central state. Thus, when Muslims appeal to the center for redress of a specific insult to Islam that can be easily resolved, the government very often acquiesces, because then it comes out looking like the protector of Muslim minority rights. This is what happened in the “Sexual Customs” incident, in which a book by that name was published that compared the hajj, the yearly Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, to homosexual orgies and sodomy with camels. All ten of China’s Muslim ethnic groups considered the book offensive. When they held demonstrations calling for it to be banned, the government complied. This approach enables the center to shift the blame for Muslim grievances to non-state or local state actors, and thus, much as in the case of O’Brien’s rightful resisters, the Muslims perceive the center as the benefactor, and the local as the enemy. In such instances the center is using a “sandwich strategy” that squeezes local officials between the petitioners and the capital. Note that the strategy can work both ways. Petitioners may perceive a disaggregated state and act accordingly, and the center may take this into account when responding to petitions or setting policy.

**Grievances, Identity, and Perception**

Chinese peasants, especially in the reform period, do not see the state as a unitary entity but instead as one or another of several different actors with which they interact in a series of dyadic relationships (local cadres/peasants, township/villagers, etc.) or, more simply, as the local state and the center. Thus peasant protests do not generally reach beyond the specific local state against which they are directed, because the protesters are unlikely to see themselves as having problems with other local states or with higher levels of the state unless these are not responsive to their demands. One of the most striking aspects of the Uighur resistance, in contrast, is the perception of the state as a unitary actor rather than as multiple disaggregated actors. This is the result of two intertwined factors. First, many Uighur grievances are caused by the center (and can only be addressed at that level). Second, Uighurs have a strong ethnic identity that differentiates them from Han Chinese, and they often mistrust the Hans in Xinjiang.

Although there are grievances of many sorts percolating beneath the surface, and anyone may feel aggrieved enough to protest, not all grievances are equal. The discussion in this article touches upon three different categories of Uighur grievances:

1. those they share with Han protesters, such as illegally high tax burdens and cadre incompetence;
2. those that emanate from the center but are not anti-state per se, such as environmental devastation and exploitation of Xinjiang by the center, insults to Islam, and anti-Han sentiment exacerbated by Han in-migration and economic inequality (as will be seen, anti-Han sentiment is sometimes tantamount to anti-state sentiment); and
3. those that are explicitly anti-state, most notably separatism (although this might be better described as a claim).

The last two grievances and the separatist claim are related to the existence of a Uighur identity apart from the Chinese state.

The exploitation and environmental destruction accompanying the Chinese government’s drive to develop Xinjiang has produced local grievances that the Uighurs have directed against the center as the force behind the destruction. The Lop Nur nuclear test site has been the focus of protest demonstrations by Uighurs in Xinjiang. In 1985, for instance, Muslim students at Xinjiang University in Urumqi demonstrated against the testing of nuclear weapons at Lop Nor. Peasants in the region complain about “health problems in humans and bad crops, especially the declining quality of local fruit products.” The center is constantly hatching plans to extract minerals, natural gas, and oil from the Tarim Basin. New discoveries may keep Xinjiang at the center of China’s energy policy. Oil and natural gas pipelines from Central Asia are also in the works. As the Uighurs see it, their land and health are being sapped for the benefit of the Han Chinese in eastern China, and they have received inadequate compensation.

The Xinjiang University protests also targeted Han in-migration. Until the 1970s, the Han Chinese brought to Xinjiang by official policies fell into four different groups: transferred work units, demobilized People’s Liberation Army troops, people rejoining families already in Xinjiang, and employees of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps. Since the early 1980s,
most of the Han Chinese settling in Xinjiang have come unofficially, looking for work or for better opportunities than they could get in their home provinces (usually Gansu or impoverished eastern provinces like Anhui and Henan). The arrival of Hans is problem enough for many Uighurs, but the economic dislocation that accompanies them is further cause for anger. State funds are apparently being diverted from “irrigation and agricultural improvements” for Uighurs “to areas settled by Han Chinese immigrants.” Uighurs also complain about “a large irrigation project” that calls for 1 million peasants to immigrate from Sichuan, while Uighur farmers are left with nothing.

Thus Xinjiang is developing economically, and the state is building new infrastructure, but the Uighurs are resentful because they believe that “the government intentionally [has] kept the region poor.” Economic development has exacerbated their grievances. Even as Han farmers benefit from new irrigation systems and lax quotas, Uighur peasants are bankrupted by rising water and fertilizer prices, strictly enforced grain quotas, and an unbearable tax burden imposed by an increasingly extractive state. The sense of being wronged is especially acute in Xinjiang, where Uighurs can see close-up the markedly better lifestyle of the Han Chinese, and Uighur peasants are barred from the cities by the residency card system. The inequality inherent in this situation is a major grievance and is frequently mentioned in separatist rhetoric.

Insults to Islam are another complaint. The Uighurs are not China’s only Muslims, and the government’s rigid control of the practice of religion is not specifically directed against them. In fact, of the ten official Islamic minority groups, the Hui are the largest and historically bore the brunt of government crackdowns. Official policy on Islam is recounted in great detail by other authors, who note that the Chinese government allows religious practice but has attempted to control Islam as much as possible by imposing strict restrictions on imams, mosques, and other matters. This often results in abuses by local officials. In addition, Communist Party cadres who are Muslims are not allowed to be actively observant, although this is enforced selectively.

In other parts of China, the sandwich strategy makes the center look like a benefactor against corrupt local regimes, but this has not been very effective with the Uighurs. Although they have ample complaints about the local state in Xinjiang because it enforces the universally unpopular birth-control limitations, harvest procurement, and other policies, they do not see the center as a benefactor. Instead the Uighurs tend to perceive the center and the local state as parts of the same, largely Han Chinese, whole, especially when both are pushing the same policies. This is especially true of grievances and claims against the center pertaining to environmental degradation, separatism, insults to Islam, and anti-Han sentiment. Compounding the problem, there are numerous Uighur cadres at the village and township levels, but Hans largely dominate the government (and Party) levels above the township. Moreover, the few Uighurs in higher governmental posts (one of whom, in fact, is the regional governor) are seen not as advocates for their fellow Uighurs but as collaborators in Han rule. Since the Uighurs see the state and the Han Chinese as different sides of the same coin, opposition to the Han and opposition to the state coalesce. Grievances against Hans can easily become grievances against the state, and vice versa.

Conditional Legitimacy and Shifting Grievances

The mechanism by which peaceful, if confrontational, protest becomes anti-state resistance is based on conditional legitimacy. To a certain extent, both Han peasants and Uighurs accord the state only conditional legitimacy. When aggrieved, most Han peasant resisters appeal to the local state for relief, thus implicitly accepting its legitimacy. If the local state fails to act, they move their appeal to a higher level of the hierarchy. In contrast, the Uighurs perceive the state as unitary, so if the local government rejects their appeal, their grievances and claims immediately take on an anti-state (and anti-Han) character. The speed with which they deny the legitimacy of the state, as compared to Han peasant resisters, is closely related to their identity as Uighurs, which unites them in opposition to the Chinese state. This identity is clearly illustrated by Uighur grievances based on perceived slights to the practice of Islam, defined broadly.

In *Oasis Identities*, Justin Jon Rudelson looks at the liberalization of China’s religion policy since 1979. Uighur peasants and merchants, at least in Turpan, demonstrate “positive sentiment” toward the government for allowing the building of new mosques and open expressions of devotion to Islam. The government appreciates their goodwill, but understands that greater religious awareness, and especially greater Islamic awareness, could just as easily lead Muslims to dissociate themselves from non-Muslim Chinese society and turn against it. Those who defend the right to practice a religion are not necessarily engaged in anti-government
activity, but an official crackdown on religious practices, monitoring (or closing) religious schools, supervising imams, and breaking up organized religious groups, may antagonize and provoke Muslim peasants and merchants. In Rudelson’s formulation, peasant and merchant support for the Chinese state is predicated on the state’s support of religious practice. It is highly conditional. If state support is withdrawn, or if the state actively moves against Islamic practices and institutions, the grudging acceptance disappears almost instantaneously. Affronts to the practice of Islam are not the only Uighur grievance, nor are they the sole catalyst for unrest, but it is perhaps no coincidence that much of the unrest in Xinjiang has come about because of state crackdowns on some aspect of Islam, be it mosque-building, imams, or religious schools, in one area or another. All that is required is an identity in opposition to the Han Chinese, and this is certainly typical of most Uighurs.

The Uighurs differ from the Han in several ways. They speak a Turkic language, do not look like Hans, and have memories of an ancient empire and, more recently, of de facto independent Uighur polities; in addition, government policy has actually helped cement their identity as Uighurs. When a specific grievance makes the Han state–Uighur divide especially stark, Uighurs unite in protest. The very act of protesting unites them even more.

The Yining incident is a good example of conditional legitimacy, shifting grievances, and organization. It is difficult to precisely reconstruct what happened in the riots of February 5–6, 1997, because Chinese government accounts of the disturbances are inconsistent. Some reports claim that the riots were the work of “drug addicts, looters, and other ‘social garbage’ who went on a binge of beating, looting, and smashing cars.” Others state that the demonstrations had been planned for months by separatists who infiltrated the areas surrounding Yining in January and February 1997. The immediate catalyst cited by eyewitnesses and non-Chinese sources was the arrest of some Uighurs before February 5. It is unclear whether this involved “a large number of Uyghurs [sic] who had been taken prisoner in a police swoop between February 1st and February 4th,” or whether it was only two Uighur religious students caught up in the “Strike Hard” campaign and perhaps associated in some way with the unofficial mäshräp clubs. In any case, on February 5, approximately 1,000 demonstrators demanded the prisoners’ release. For several hours police used non-lethal means to break up the crowd, but when these failed, they apparently opened fire on the protesters. The demonstrators proceeded to go “on a rampage, torching cars, looting Chinese stalls, burning flags, and shouting pro-independence slogans,” including (according to Chinese sources) “Fight the unbelievers with all our might using the Qu’ran as a weapon,” “Don’t pay taxes,” and “We want nothing from the government.” The protesters killed seven Han bystanders, destroyed cars, and battled police. In a clear repudiation of the legitimacy of the state, protesters also apparently burned government-issued documents, including residency permits (hukou) and driver’s licenses, and stripped off their “Han-style” clothes. Large numbers of Uighurs were killed, although it is unclear how many. In the wake of the violence, officials closed the city to outsiders without proper passes for two weeks, sent in an armored column that took up residence in the central park, imposed a curfew, and closed the local airport. Many Uighurs were arrested and executed in the following months.

James Millward ties the unrest to the ban on mäshräp, unofficial “young men’s clubs governed by strict Islam-inspired rules of conduct” (although they also apparently sponsored soccer tournaments). Chinese officials had been putting pressure on the mäshräp since 1995, and had forced them underground by early 1997. The Chinese government was suspicious of the mäshräp, most likely because they were organizations outside the purview of the state. While the clubs were apparently not anti-state per se, the prohibition may have fostered an attitude conducive to the emergence of anti-state grievances and claims once a catalytic event occurred. By refusing to release the prisoners, the government lost whatever legitimacy it still had with the demonstrators, and the anti-state and anti-Han grievances and claims came to the surface, inflaming an already tense situation. The Yining activists’ shift from anger at the arrests (and perhaps at the police violence) to becoming a general anti-state, anti-Han protest against the government was fairly rapid (i.e., no more than forty-eight hours after the last arrests), whereas in the Han riots in Renshou in 1993, for example, the peasants never...
turned against the center and only challenged one of its proclamations several months into the protests, and then only briefly. Thus, Uighur resistance based on one type of grievance can quickly become a protest incorporating many other grievances. In contrast, as Bernstein and Lü, for example, note, peasant resistance due to tax burdens has not really coalesced with resistance based on other grievances.

Airing separatist claims is the ultimate rejection of the legitimacy of the state, and the emergence of separatist demands in a protest indicates a hardening of positions on both sides. It tells the government that the resistance can no longer be construed as legitimate and must therefore be put down with extreme prejudice. The Yining incident, for example, ended in great bloodshed, while the Urumqi market incident (discussed below) did not, at least initially. The protesters in Urumqi never crossed the Party’s “red line,” whereas the Yining protesters definitively did, although the behavior of the police in each situation determined to a certain extent where the red line was. Crackdowns on Uighur acts of resistance can be harsher than crackdowns on Han peasant resistance of a similar magnitude. Waves of arrests followed the Urumqi market protest, for example, even though it was smaller than the Renshou protests.

Uighurs begin with many of the same grievances as Han peasants. Both groups object to the birth-control policy, corrupt cadres, environmental destruction (and the inadequate compensation associated with it), and tax burdens (especially in the form of procurement). There are other grievances, such as perceived insults to Islam, which do not exactly challenge the state, but set Uighurs against both the center and the local authorities. These grievances, combined with the separate Uighur identity, increase the chance that protests will escalate if the state rejects a legitimate grievance. Separatism is probably not the primary issue for most Uighurs, but it is there, and once appeals for the resolution of seemingly unrelated grievances are rejected, it can come to the fore, leading to escalation.
Legitimate Uighur protests can become anti-state resistance relatively quickly, and certainly more easily than Bernstein and Lü saw in their look at the connections between resistance based on tax burdens and resistance caused by other grievances. But the shift from legitimate petitioning to anti-state resistance is just one result of the Uighur perception of the state as a unitary actor. Episodic Uighur resistance can spread more quickly and become more organized because of this perception, increasing the perceived threat to the state.

The Escalation of Resistance: Organization

Many researchers, almost desperately in some cases, are searching for the beginnings of significant peasant resistance movements, perhaps even movements that could overthrow the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Organized opposition is threatening to the CCP. Indeed, if a protest grows too large, and shows too much evidence of organization, the government may crack down even if the demands are legitimate. Falun Gong, for instance, acknowledged the legitimacy of the CCP by petitioning the government for fairer treatment with a peaceful sit-in outside of Zhongnanhai. Rather than grant freedom of religious practice, the government labeled the movement a cult and outlawed it. What terrified Party leaders was Falun Gong’s appeal to more than one socio-economic group and its organizational power, especially its ability to organize without the knowledge of the state security apparatus.47

Researchers have failed to find two crucial elements: organized resistance above the purely local level, and a movement that can persist over a long period as it pursues its goals. Bernstein and Lü make a valiant effort, but even they do not go so far as to say that peasants are routinely organizing at the supra-local level, let alone in movements. Bernstein and Lü find “trends that pointed toward greater coherence, coordination, and duration” among Han peasant tax resisters, and they describe in great detail the increasing number of incidents and sophistication of unrest among Han peasants.48 In some areas leaders have emerged and have kept up the resistance over lengthy periods. Communication between resisters has improved. Village officials have often been unable to suppress these activities and had to call in township forces (or higher).49 But this is as far as any of the major commentators on Han peasant resistance are willing to go in finding anything approaching organized movements among the peasantry, while others doubt the ability of the peasantry to rise up in any major way.50

The Uighurs do not have a large-scale organized resistance movement. But the Uighur resistance, in contrast to the Han peasant resistance, has clearly “succeeded” if success is defined as alarming the Chinese government to the point that countering it has become a very public concern, leading to large-scale repression. Xinjiang has been relatively quiet for the past several years, and it would be a mistake to say that it is “bubbling over,” as some journalists are wont to do. It is Uighur resistance, however, not Han peasant resistance, that is regularly listed as one of the top security threats faced by the Chinese government. Lucian Bianco argues that the increase in peasant resistance since the beginning of the reform era is due to the increasingly open political opportunity structure, which gives them more room to resist.51 In Xinjiang, the political opportunity structure for Uighur resistance is relatively closed, yet there is still a fair amount of resistance. But this is not what worries the government. The reason the CCP is so afraid of “an extremely small number” of troublemakers is the key to understanding the Uighur resistance. The threat is organization.

While many commentators focus on individual or small-group resistance, the ability of unrest among Uighurs to metastasize rapidly is worth examining. According to the East Turkestan Information Center (ETIC), on August 6, 2001, a group of “Chinese” (presumably Han) tax collectors approached an elderly fruit seller at a market in Urumqi. The man refused to pay the tax, insisting he had already done so, whereupon a (presumably Han) policeman punched him. A Uighur woman then threw a piece of fruit at the tax collectors, who became enraged and responded by beating her. Other Uighurs began throwing fruit, and soon eleven policemen arrived to protect the tax collectors. In the ensuing chaos, police detained one young Uighur. ETIC then reports:

Later, a crowd of an estimated 450 people gathered in front of the local police station and demanded immediate release of the detained person. The protesters sat right on the doorstep of the police station. The crowd sent four representatives inside the station to obtain information on the detained person and to receive the explanation of the police authorities on the violent and inappropriate behavior of the tax collectors.52

The representatives were unable to obtain the release of the prisoner or to get an explanation. The police then broke up the protest and took photographs. The next
day, police began rounding up small-time Uighur merchants, eventually detaining about 200 who allegedly did not have documents allowing them to live and do business in Urumqi.\textsuperscript{53} Interestingly, the behavior of the Uighur protesters was remarkably similar to that of the Renshou rioters in the famous Han peasant resistance in Sichuan in 1993. In that case, oppressive tax burdens led to increasingly larger and more violent riots, as the peasants rallied around Beijing’s proclamation that peasant tax burdens should be no higher than 5 percent and, convinced that the center was on their side, fought local officials. At one point during the unrest, Xiang Wenqing, a leader of the protesters, was arrested. Demonstrators immediately called for his release, and when Sichuan’s deputy governor made a sympathetic visit to the county, they took this as a sign of support from higher up in the government. Soon afterward, the police released Xiang Wenqing.\textsuperscript{54}

In both cases, taxation was the primary grievance behind the unrest, but the (central) government’s legitimacy was not challenged. In Renshou, in fact, the protesters appealed to the center as their benefactor. No such appeal is recorded in Urumqi, but the old merchant’s insistence that he had already paid the tax is worthy of note. ETIC says that merchants are often subjected to multiple demands for taxes because they move around the marketplace. The old merchant was not protesting the tax per se (at least not in this instance), but rather a burden over and above the legal tax limit.\textsuperscript{55} Not to overstretch the point, but one could say that he was implicitly appealing in the first instance for the government edict on taxation to be implemented properly (so that he would not have to pay the tax), and in certain respects this is similar to rightful resistance. Perhaps that is why the crowd gathered outside the police station to demand the release of the prisoner denounced the tax collectors, not the tax itself.

What explains the swift crystallization and organization of the protest in Urumqi? An incident related to a situation faced by a large number of people in close proximity can galvanize them to action, especially when one group identity is in opposition to another. No doubt the old merchant was not the first Uighur target of the zealous Han tax collectors. When the young Uighur man was arrested, this created a focal point for protest: a single, specific demand that everyone could agree on quickly, without any kind of visible leadership (although it is theoretically possible that there were unseen provocateurs). In Renshou, by contrast, tax burdens galvanized the protesters to action, but it took an energetic, visible leader (like Xiang Wenqing or the original organizer, Zhang De’an) to encourage a protest (or riot) in the absence of a specific grievance that called for a specific solution. The arrest of Xiang Wenqing provided this to the Renshou protesters.

Daniel Kelliher claims that large numbers of people facing the same conditions may react in a similar manner and thus take pseudo-collective action that can affect change in a policy outcome.\textsuperscript{56} He is referring to de-collectivization, but organizationally his model offers a partial explanation of Uighur resistance. Although divided by class and geography, Uighurs see themselves as living in a unitary state represented by an identifiably separate ethnic group. As such, they all essentially face the same conditions and have the same grievances. But the situation needs to be much more specific and concrete than Kelliher’s vaguely similar socio-economic conditions and common government policy, which he claims facilitated the rapid wave of de-collectivization throughout the country. Thus, the loosely comparable conditions faced by almost all Uighurs provide a backdrop for relatively easy organization around specific, concrete grievances.

Although any of the grievances described above can serve as a catalyst or an aggravating factor, perceived affronts to Islam, defined broadly, seem to have been behind some of the largest and best-known episodes of unrest since 1990. Faced with a common grievance, Muslim Uighurs in the same locality act in the same way—they come together to protest. Whatever the full story of the 1997 Yining incident may be, for example, the proximate trigger for the violence was the arrest of Uighurs, possibly unsanctioned religious students, by Chinese police. The police action provided a grievance, the injustice of the arrests, and a ready-made demand, the release of the prisoners.

Arrest as a catalyst for riots, and religion as a basis for incitement and organization, can also be seen in a July 1995 incident in Khotan, when the authorities arrested two imams whose teachings had strayed from the Quran to current events. They were replaced with Abdul Kayum, who in turn also began to preach on topics not directly related to the Quran, notably women’s rights, leading to his own arrest. On July 7, a crowd of
several hundred of his congregants converged on the Party and government compound, demanding his release. Violence followed when their request was refused. People’s Armed Police personnel and armed reinforcements subsequently trapped the crowd in the compound, where they beat, tear-gassed, and arrested many demonstrators, with injuries on both sides, including sixty-six government officials, and an unknown number of demonstrators.\(^{57}\)

Note that one need not be an Islamic fundamentalist or a Sufi to participate in such demonstrations, but simply must see one’s identity as a Muslim Uighur as a separate matter from identification with the Han Chinese state. In Uighur eyes the state’s legitimacy is conditional on what it does to allow the free practice of Islam. When confronted with a case where Islam is not honored, many Uighurs act collectively even without recognizable leadership. This explains the rapid spread of some of the Uighur protests beyond township or, in some cases, county boundaries.\(^{58}\) Whereas such grievances as overzealous implementation of the birth-control policy are necessarily local in character, a Uighur does not have to witness an insult to Islam to be aggrieved and driven to protest. The “Sexual Customs” incident showed how Islam serves as a catalyst for supra-local organization. When this is conflated with the potential for anti-state grievances to appear, it makes the state very nervous.

Islam also serves as the backdrop for more formal organization. Religious schools could theoretically train militants, as they have done in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and given that they bring together a substantial portion of the male population every Friday, mosques can disseminate anti-state propaganda and fire up the faithful.\(^{59}\) Muslim brotherhoods (\textit{jiao pai}), reportedly popular among the Hui, are another direct mechanism for organization.\(^{60}\) This organizational option is not open to non-religious Han peasant resisters. That is why the state is focused on controlling imams and mosques, and severely restricting the number of religious schools or organizations.\(^{61}\)

Where Do We Go from Here?

A basic understanding of episodic Uighur unrest in Xinjiang provides a background that may help in analyzing Han resistance. This is a research program that is just beginning.

Uighur separatist groups exist and can take advantage of opportune moments to exacerbate or even plan unrest. They can also engage in activities less directly analogous to Han peasant resistance, such as armed attacks on government assets. The sophistication of these attacks cannot be explained simply by the Uighur perception of the state as a unitary actor. It would be useful to examine the organization and tactics of Uighur separatist groups to see how they differ from violent Han resisters, and whether anything similar might arise among the Han Chinese population. Is there any Han innovation in the tactics used to confront the state?

Likewise, there is a trans-national element in the Uighur resistance that is missing in the Han peasant resistance. Border trade and increased trans-national interaction have complicated Chinese efforts to crack down on resistance, although the government has been fairly successful in recent years. To date, violent Han peasant resisters have had little formal training and have had to obtain their own weapons. How would an outside source of both affect the organization, persistence, and “effectiveness” of these violent resisters?

In more theoretical terms, the findings of this article might enrich the social movement literature. In the language of social movement theory, Uighurs have grievances against the Chinese state, and Islam (as but one example) can serve as a mobilizing structure for collective action. Uighurs’ self-identity as separate from Han Chinese leads them to perceive the Chinese state as a unitary actor, which prevents one group of elites from co-opting them in large numbers and radicalizes collective action. It also might be useful to bring the nature of their grievances, long missing from the social movement literature, back into the equation.\(^{62}\)

The Uighurs’ status as a Muslim ethnic minority shapes their grievances, and the extent, nature, and methods of their resistance. Predictions about the future course of Han peasant resistance are beyond the scope of this article, but Uighur resistance can inform our understanding of Han peasant resistance. Uighur resistance has been a great concern to the Chinese Communist Party for the past fifteen years or so, whereas Han peasant resistance, which occurs on a much larger scale among a population many magnitudes more dangerous to CCP hegemony, has not caused as much concern. This seeming discrepancy is explained by the fact that while some Uighur grievances are similar to Han peasant grievances, the shared identity of Uighurs and the legitimacy of some of their grievances place them in opposition to the Han Chinese and the state perceived as a unitary actor. They see little difference between the center and the local state, and view the state’s legitimacy as entirely conditional—for example, on proper respect for Islam. Even protests that share some char-
characteristics with rightful resistance can quickly escalate into violent confrontations where the resisters put forward separatist claims and anti-Han grievances that entirely reject the legitimacy of the state. Faced with a common reason for unrest, otherwise disorganized Uighurs can rapidly organize around a specific, concrete grievance, even if they are not present at the scene of the “crime,” and the state, in response, may act harshly. The resistance that results is often more violent than Han peasant resistance and certainly more of a threat to the state.

Notes

1. Given governmental secrecy and the difficulty of doing fieldwork or even of getting good information out of Xinjiang, the quality and quantity of the data are the main problem in any project even vaguely related to Uighur separatism. In this article, I rely on second-hand news accounts of the incidents written by foreign observers, as well as emigre Uighur organizations. Lest I be accused of selecting on the dependent variable, I wish to state that the incidents described in this article may or may not be representative of Uighur protest in general—with the information available, there is no way to find out. As a result, my conclusions are necessarily very tentative and limited in scope, pending additional research.

2. In addition to the other works on Han peasant resistance referenced in this article, see, for example, Xiaolin Guo, “Land Expropriation and tentative and limited in scope, pending additional research.


4. Ibid., p. 34.

5. Ibid., pp. 34–35

6. “Direct rightful resistance” is more confrontational than the original “mediated rightful resistance.” Frustrated by the lack of success of their petitions, some protesters have taken a more confrontational stance, challenging local governments directly and seeking to solve the problems themselves. See Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, Rightful Resistance: Contentious Politics in Rural China (forthcoming).


27. By Islam I mean only a set of religious beliefs or practices that can serve as the basis for identity and organization separate from the state. For the purposes of my argument, the content of Islamic belief is not relevant.

28. Justin Jon Rudelson, Oasis Identities (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 170. Rudelson himself also notes that Turpan is probably one of the more pro–Han Chinese oases in Xinjiang and has seen relatively little of the violence common in areas like Ili, Aktu, and Kashgar (pp. 12–13).

29. Again, Bovington confirms this stark ethnic divide (“Uyghur Resistance to Han Rule,” pp. 44–45).


31. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.


33. Steve Mufson, “Ethnic Turmoil Roils Western China; Border Region’s Muslim Uighurs Persist in Opposing Majority Han,” Washington Post (February 23, 1997).

34. See Michael Dillon, Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Far Northwest (New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2004), p. 96, for his summary of the account in Yu Xuqi, ed., Xinjiang fandui minzu fenlianzu douzheng shihua (History of the Struggle Against Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang) (Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 1999). The Chinese sources claim that two separatist leaders and their followers who had infiltrated into Yining were behind the violence, and it is certainly possible that separatist agitators took advantage of the demonstrations to pursue their own agenda. It is doubtful that the 1,000 demonstrators were all separatists or even members of mihdi, because the protests included at least one woman. It is also doubtful that the separatists would have been able to arrange the arrests that set off the demonstrations.

35. Dillon, Xinjiang, p. 94, citing ETIC, March 18, 1997. He also later cites a Uighur eyewitness account, given to Kyodo on April 29, 1997, confirming that the demonstrators were protesting against the arrest of Muslim students, or at least thought they were.

36. Millward, Violence in Xinjiang, p. 17.

37. Dillon, Xinjiang, p. 94.


40. Ibid., pp. 96–98.

42. “Chinese Troops Seal Off Moslem Border Town After Racial Riot,” Agence France-Presse (February 11, 1997); Dillon, *Xinjiang*, p. 98; Millward, *Violence in Xinjiang*, p. 15.


45. Ibid., p. 138.

46. See Perry and Selden, ed., *Chinese Society*.


49. Ibid., pp. 156–57.


51. Ibid.

52. “Uighur Traders Clashed with Chinese Police in Urumchi,” East Turkestan Information Center, August 13, 2001 (www.uygur.org/wunn21/2001_08_13.htm). The Web site is obviously an activist site advocating independence from China, but I have no reason to think that it is any less qualified to report the facts of specific incidents than the official Chinese media.


55. However, this does not mean that the merchants accorded the state more than instrumental legitimacy to make their case to the authorities. It is possible that the merchants had been attempting to evade the tax by moving around the market. I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for this insight.


57. Dillon, *Xinjiang*, p. 70; Millward, *Violence in Xinjiang*, p. 15.

58. Raphael Israeli, “A New Wave of Muslim Revivalism in China,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17, no. 2 (October 1997): 275–76, states that there were riots in twelve counties in Xinjiang between November 5 and November 12, 1993.


61. One of my anonymous reviewers points out that the state-run Islamic College in Urumqi is the only religious school for Uighurs that is still open in Xinjiang.


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