



## Several Loud Cracks in an Almaty Bazaar

by Casey Michel - 10.09.2012

On the lowest level of the largest bazaar in Almaty sits a small, unassuming restaurant. A square window and a lone door are the only things marking the business from the rows of nut vendors and thrift marts flanking the eatery. The interior's not much more memorable: white-washed walls, a handful of tables, and a humming vending machine cramp the space. A woman in her twenties, wearing a cerulean frock and matching hat -- staples of Kazakhstani restaurateurs -- greets you as you enter, waving you in as her quiet coworkers scuttle between latticed chairs and a brushed-steel serving counter.

Soft chatter is all you hear, and muted decor is all you see. As you scan the place, you realize that you could be anywhere in Kazakhstan. This could be any restaurant in the country.

But as you sit down, and the waitress, all half-smile and almond eyes, hands you a teal menu, and it's then that you realize this is no anonymous Kazakh eatery, no simple restaurant offering barsak and pelmini and nothing else worth pronouncing. Chinese characters dominate the menu. A glance confirms that the prices are still tenge, not renminbi; a quick eavesdrop confirms the hostess still speaks in Russian, not Mandarin.

And yet these people not Kazakh, or Uzbek, or Kyrgyz, or any of the ethnicities comprising those eponymous Central Asian states. These are Uyghurs. Those Turkic, Muslim Chinese that you'd long heard of, hailing from that sealed land, that Second Tibet that had been ground and quashed just like its prominent, immolating neighbors in Lhasa.

East Turkestan, they call it. Or Xinjiang, as the rest of us do.

But these waitresses, these Uyghurs, are here in Almaty. Their ancestors had fled Xinjiang (Chinese for "New Frontier") when they had a chance. They likely arrived here back in the 1940s, when what is now the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Province was independent in more than mere name. Before Mao's Red Army had trundled across from Peking to wrap Lhasa, Kashgar, Urumqi -- and all the attendant natural reserves -- into its orbit and folded those putative barbarians into the Middle Kingdom.

Mao forced the Uyghurs to face the Forbidden City in a unity of coercion not seen since the Tang Dynasty, and the relatives of the people now serving the Almaty patrons fled when the policies of Stalin were preferential to the realities of Xinjiang. When the Soviet machine was still preferable to the boot of Beijing.

History has shown these Uyghurs to be wise. Certainly, they're as wise as the ones peopling Stockholm and Munich, the ones serving pizzas in Tirana and manti in Brighton Beach. These Uyghurs have been able to thrive, it seems. They enjoy their adoptive homes in all their facets: jobs, families, children. Trappings of a life well-managed. Shawls, skullcaps, beards are signs of a culture well-maintained and of a religion, carried for a thousand years, still alive.

### Uyghurs and Islam

"Uyghurs and Islam are almost inseparable," said Henryk Szadziewski, of the Uyghur Human Rights Project. "You cannot have one without the other. Islam is as much a part of the Uyghurs' identity as anything."

Inseparable, like a Russian and his vodka or like a Kazakh and her horse. Bundled up in the same ethnic package, be it in Almaty, Ankara, or America. And yet these Uyghurs, both Chinese and abroad, don't carry their Islam with any of the heavy-handed literalism that some Saudis or Pashtuns have perfected. Rather, Islam (to paraphrase Colin Thubron) seems to rest lightly on these people, leaning more toward birthright than demand.

To be sure, all of those beautiful tics that terrorize Michele Bachmann still exist with the Uyghurs: mosques, salah, hijabs. But those appurtenances are less a sign of some nefarious inculcation or some dark-arted indoctrination and more of mere cultural colophon. Uyghurs are Muslim because to be otherwise is to not be Uyghur. Like Georgians and Orthodoxy, like Catalonians and Catholicism, Uyghurs carry Islam as inheritance. It's understood, and it is, by and large, free of force. These Uyghurs that I saw in Almaty -- just as the ones from Scandinavia to San Francisco -- are able to observe their religion, to keep it alive and well-nourished, because their new lands welcome their prayers.

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However, for those that remain in Xinjiang, such practice, such spiritual inheritance, has suddenly grown markedly tenuous. Beijing sees faults and fears in Uyghurs' salah, and, as evidenced by this last season of striking persecution, the Politburo has found ever-expanding methods of dissolving the religion that Xinjiang's Uyghurs have held dear for a millennium.

### **Recent Restrictions**

The restrictions imposed over the summer are not objectively new. After all, China's blanket atheism has led to ebb-and-flow religious persecution in the past. Nor is such clampdown necessarily relegated to the Uyghurs: one needs to look no further than the Falun Gong or the Christians dotting the country to note the militant atheism China purveys.

But over the last few months -- including Ramadan, that holiest month of Islam -- China has imposed newer, more suffocating diktats, the likes of which are tighter and tougher than any yet seen in modern memory. These new rules attempt to divest a people from its past, stewing a situation that could, under the right light, condemn a minority culture and any hopes of a peaceful and multi-confessional future.

### **The Raid**

It began, somewhat predictably, in a school: a raid in early June, with Chinese forces gas-and-flashbanging their way into a classroom of Islamic teaching. The teachers were spreading nothing but indoctrination and illegal text, police said. They wanted to brainwash the youth. They had to be stopped.

And so, they were. Security forces stormed the unarmed classroom, burning and beating students and teachers alike. Dozens were injured. Twelve of the students were savaged badly enough to land in the hospital, all due to the police's ham-fisted "rescue."

Of course, the only news trailing out on the raid was filtered through state media, so whether these were terroristic trainings or, more likely, simple Koranic instruction remains unknown. But the weight of the rescue -- the force employed and the injuries incurred -- clearly outweighed of the dangers disseminated in that

classroom. It was an admixture of Beslan and Yearning For Zion, a raid that can only frighten parents and harden future schooling, driving instruction that much further underground.

Meanwhile, no word has yet leaked on the status of the children; no word likely will. But we did hear, around the same time, of a 12-year-old named Mirzahid, taken in because he had displayed some form of Islamic leaning, some purportedly nascent trait of a Potential Future Terrorist. He was arrested and forced into police custody, a seventh-grader held apart from family and friends and any world he knew. He was alone, because he was Muslim.

And then, he died.

### **Mirzahid**

Suicide, the police said. Mirzahid did himself in. Ignore the bruises. Ignore the strangulation marks. Something switched, and this 12-year-old boy -- hiding all those next-hijack-plot, next-terrorist-act details, likely -- is no longer a threat. You don't need the details. You don't need an investigation. These are the facts: suicide, and nothing more.

And so, a prepubescent terrorist is gone. And twelve of his middle school compatriots, intubated and bandaged, sit hospitalized -- they sit scared, along with family, along with teachers. They're learning from an early age the repression China cherishes. They're learning the chasm between reality and reaction.

But those, those were just the children; that was just the next generation suffering one aspect of the state's persecution. The rest of the restrictions would be reserved for the older Muslims, the Uyghurs conscious of their faith and the consequent risk carried therein.

Thus, as Ramadan approached, the state dictated that any Uyghur employed by the government would not be allowed to fast during the daylight hours.\* Same, naturally, goes for professors. Ramadan -- that grand, global tradition observed from Sumatra to Casablanca to my neighborhood in Park Slope, Brooklyn -- would be forcibly foregone. Fasting would cease.

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How this was enforced, I have no idea. I don't presume there were feeding tubes employed, but there are reports of teachers and state employees shuttled into state cafeterias come lunchtime, prodded as cattle to the trough. Local pols, likewise, were encouraged to bring food to those small towns outside the urban centers. Gifts, the state called it; they were encouraged to bring "gifts." Presents of state power.

"If you don't subscribe to these restrictions, it's viewed through a security -- or insecurity -- lens," said Scott Flipse, deputy director of policy and research at the US Council on International Religious Freedom. "China has viewed religious extremism as a threat, and therefore as a security threat, and therefore it has expanded the notion into trying to stop peaceful religious activity and into weakening religious consciousness."

Still, that wasn't all. Students were forced to remain on campus, and some also were prevented from fasting. Welfare recipients -- the weakest, who had been forced to fast simply out of penury -- were forced to sign waivers declaring both their willingness to turn into neighborhood watchmen and their eternal allegiance to the state before they could receive their checks.

Alim Seytoff, director of the UHRP, told me that no Uyghurs were forewarned of the clampdown. No consultation occurred. Officials said only that these restrictions were meant to improve the health of those affected, not -- no, certainly not -- to cleave a people and its religion.

Flipse, who'd visited Xinjiang in 2005, agreed with Seytoff, noting that China's concurrent approach to economic development -- Beijing plans to pour millions into rehabbing roadways, pipeline, and Old Kashgar -- would do little to assuage the problems that the restrictions wring.

"China is going after the Uyghurs' core identities: culture, language, religion," he said. "And if the message is, 'We are going to buy you off,' then no one's opposed to this. But that's the Communist response to everything, and the thing is that it never works."

Flipse noted that the plans for economic development would be doubly doubtful in light of the restrictions, which, in addition to the forced feeding, have led

the government to encumber mosques with a combination of surveillance and infiltration. Declaring there would be no public displays of Muslim prayer, Beijing shoveled all thanks to Allah, all manner of gratitude and ritual, behind closed doors. All prayer would be coerced into submission. Scattered and smothered by the state.

"CCTV cameras operate at every mosque," Seytoff told me. "Every individual who enters a mosque is registered. Every imam is paid by the government to preach the sermon of his own preference, usually never opposing but obeying the government. Informers are sent to every mosque and religious gathering. ..."

"No Uyghur Muslim could escape the surveillance of the Chinese government."

### **Sharp Snaps of Violence**

Szadziewski said he had seen similar restrictions before. While a teacher at the Kashgar Teacher's College in Xinjiang during the late 1990s, he had noticed local police idling outside the student dorms during Ramadan, noting which lights would go on prior to sunrise. They were marking the pious. They were figuring which ones to later tail.

A dozen years on, nothing's changed. Not for the better, at least. The faithful are noted, and shunted, and silenced. A few weeks into Ramadan, the police announced they'd disrupted some nebulous Uyghur terrorist ring. Details were sparse, but twenty were arrested, sorted into prison, and all but guaranteed to see neither probation nor family for the remainder of their natural lives.

The entire affair reeked of the same statist stench as the recent "hijacking" in the area, which saw a pair of Uyghurs die, and four others imprisoned, for purportedly attempting to commandeer a commuter flight. But in lieu of a smuggled box-cutter or a well-fashioned shiv, these men opted for ... a crutch. As Seytoff noted, "Nobody in their right mind would simply use a crutch to hijack a plane."

Szadziewski said that he doesn't believe this Ramadan clampdown is tied directly to that hijacking, but he does note the thread connecting the two.

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"The hijacking was likely another example of the officials attempting to find an easy reason to portray the Uyghurs as nothing but terrorists and separatists," he remarked. "That's exactly what's going on with these new restrictions. It's the state attempting to control an entire population and show the rest of the country that these backward religious people need to be controlled because their religion will only lead to more future attacks, and that [these restrictions] are needed to prevent more of the rioting we saw three years ago."

### The Riots

The rioting to which Szadziewski alludes is well-known, if not well-detailed. A mid-summer spark in 2009 led to a mass uprising, with buildings, streets, and inter-ethnic ties torched while Uyghurs protested the decades of repression and invasion coming from Beijing. Two hundred individuals -- many Uyghur, many Han -- died. Hundreds more were injured, and dozens of Uyghur men were disappeared, bagged and tagged and tossed in some hole while China reeled from some of the most violent protest seen since Tiananmen.

Three years on, there's been no repeat of the rioting. But -- as Cairo, as London, as Los Angeles know -- calm does not beget peace. The new rounds of screw-tightening, this new level of Ramadan repression, will achieve none of the long-run goals the Politburo holds for Xinjiang. It can only exacerbate the fault-lines creaking through East Turkestan.

"This cannot and will not have any positive long-term success," Szadziewski told me. "There's no way these restrictions could achieve what China wants in Xinjiang. It can't do anything but anger the residents of Xinjiang. I mean, [Beijing is] forcing restaurants to remain open during Ramadan. What are they hoping to achieve? What good can possibly come from this?"

### How to Cook a Noodle

Indeed, it is this last restriction that is perhaps the most bizarre: that the state would force restaurants to remain open, market demand be damned. And yet it is this door-prop law that, for many non-Uyghurs, is the most tangible, simply because of our experiences with those who worked in restaurants like the one in Almaty.

Because while you were there, while you watched the women of the restaurant scurry about with orders and tea and plates of boiling lagman, you would always see one man in the back, one copper-skinned thirty-something manning the restaurant's lone stove slab. The man worked amidst a thin fleece of white steam, his pale skullcap and peppered stubble just visible as he sorted the spices and meats and lines of dough necessary for customers' satisfactions.

He, too, is Uyghur: stone-faced, with a knobby chin and dark eyes. He looks precisely like those arrested and disappeared in Xinjiang -- the ones destroyed by the state just beyond the easternmost border.

You see this man and his skullcap and his ropy arms, and you watch him stretch a three-foot cylinder of dough across the stove, grabbing both ends and folding the tube in half, raising it above his head before he CRACKS! it back on to the slab, jumping the whole restaurant with the violence of the noise. And you find yourself recalling the stories of the riots a few years past, and you wonder at the growing repression, and you hear the man offer another CRACK! in the kitchen, and you think about the turbulence and animus and hatred Beijing has engendered among an entire people on its western frontier. And you think about this man's distant cousins arrested, and about the rioting and "hijacks" and this CRACK! latest round of repression, and you find yourself realizing that it's just a matter of CRACK! time before those residents of Xinjiang, those Uyghurs still CRACK! atrophying in their home and native land, still suffering CRACK! the growing and unending persecution of CRACK! Beijing -- that it is just a matter of time before all that restriction and all that repression will force these Uyghurs and their subservience and their patience to finally, jarringly -- and lastingly -- crack. ❀