

Uyghurs

More than nine million Uyghurs (also spelled "Uighur," "Uygur," "Uiger," "Uighuir," or "Uiguir") live in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China. Xinjiang was known as Eastern Turkestan until 1876, when the ruling Manchu army invaded the area and changed its name. Xinjiang means "new dominion."

Before 1921 the various Turkic groups in Xinjiang called themselves by the name of the oasis near which they lived. Turkic leaders met at Tashkent in 1921, and chose the name "Uyghur," which means "unity" or "alliance," as a mark of their identity.

Since the 1950s, millions of Chinese have migrated into Xinjiang, putting an end to the Uyghurs' hope for an independent homeland.

Daily life

Many Uyghur people cultivate cotton, grapes, melons and fruit trees. They make use of an ingenious irrigation system, which pipes snow melt water from the mountains surrounding Xinjiang into the desert oases. In 1990 agriculture accounted for just over one-third of the regional economy.

Traditionally Uyghur families have included one husband, but multiple wives. This practice, which is gradually disappearing, is in conflict with the marriage law of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The marriage law also calls for a minimum age at marriage of 20 for men and 18 for women. Yet, because of the strong influence of Islam, Uyghur people consider males to be adults at age 12 and females at 9 years. Marrying at an early age continues to be common practice.

First marriages are arranged by parents, though there is no interference from parents in any subsequent marriages. The divorce and remarriage rates are high—there is no social stigma associated with divorce. In 1990 the divorce rate among the Uyghur was 5.25% per year, which was over seven times the average of the PRC.

From the 1950s, improved medical care and better economic development has spurred a rapid increase in the Uyghur population. Family planning was not implemented until late 1988. Population growth has remained high, probably because the death rate has come down more quickly than the birth rate. As living standards rise, the desired number of children has dropped. For example, when asked how many children they wanted, 35-49-year-old women responded that they wanted five or six. Women in the 15-34-year-old bracket said they wanted three or four. Urban Uyghur women want only two or three.

According to the 1990 national census, the proportion of illiterate and semi-literate Uyghur people was 26.6%, compared with a national average of 22%.

Most Uyghur follow a folk Islam mixed with superstition. Islam is stronger in southern Xinjiang than in the north.

The Uyghurs and the Gospel

Nestorian missionaries first appeared in China in 635 AD, after they had already been working in Central Asia for a century. By 1009, around 200,000 Turkic Keirat (the forerunners of today's Uyghur) had been baptized. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the entire tribe was considered Christian. It has recently been estimated that there were as many as eight million Christians in Central Asia.

In the fourteenth century Christianity disappeared from among the Uyghur for 500 years, and they became Muslims. In 1892 the Swedish Missionary Society recommenced work among the Uyghur. By the 1930s more than 300 Uyghurs had become Christians, primarily in Kashgar.

When Abdullah Khan came to Yarkant in 1933, he expelled the missionaries and eliminated the Uyghur believers in a mass execution. He claimed, "It is my duty, according to our law, to put you to death, because by your preaching you destroyed the faith of some of us."

Despite the presence of many Han Christians in Xinjiang, few have a vision to reach the Uyghurs. Many church leaders readily admit that they have no burden to bring the Good News of Christ to the Uyghur people.

Today about 50 known Uyghur Christians meet in two small fellowships in China, although 500 Uyghur believers have recently emerged in neighbouring Kazakhstan. Recent reports indicate that many Uyghur in China may be on the verge of accepting Christ.

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Urgent Prayer Need

Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, urgently needs a [French teacher](#) to join their staff team in August. Pray that God will provide the right person to meet this need.