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# What Explains the Rise of Majority-Minority Tensions and Conflict in Xinjiang?

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### ABSTRACT

In the past few years there has been a rise of inter-ethnic violence in China. While ethno-cultural repression and ineffective state policies are correctly attributed as key culprits behind this reality, this article suggests that socio-economic factors play a fundamental contributory role as well. Using the Xinjiang case, the article maps ethnic tensions and violence as a manifestation and expression of a growing and heightened ethno-cultural consciousness stemming from ethnic minorities' low socio-economic status due, in part, to internal Han migration, and a labour market process – involving agency and structure – that has shaped a split and segmented labour market.

### KEYWORDS

Xinjiang; ethnic minority; Uyghur; conflict; violence; labour market

## Introduction

Inter-ethnic violence has been on the rise in mainland China. On 18 September 2015, a knife-wielding attack in Aqsu, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), claimed the lives of nearly 50 individuals and injured 50.<sup>1</sup> On 1 March 2014, another knife attack in Kunming's Railway Station claimed the lives of 29 individuals and injured 130. Chinese state media alleged that Uyghur militants were the assailants in both cases. In November 2013, a car explosion in Beijing's Tiananmen Square by five Uyghurs killed two and injured 40. This followed two separate outbursts of reported violence in Xinjiang between Uyghurs and the Han (the national majority, but one of the many regional minorities in XUAR) on 26 and 28 June 2013, when 35 people were killed in total. They occurred near the fourth anniversary of the July 2009 Ürümqi riots, which resulted in 197 deaths and 1,721 injuries. Suffice it to say, repeated acts of ethnic-minority-rooted<sup>2</sup> violence in the past few years have claimed hundreds of lives, and injured thousands across China.

Received wisdom suggests that tensions have increased due to ethno-cultural repression and state policies that limit religious practices, phase of minority language instruction in schools, and promote the negative commodification and representation of ethnic minorities.

The Communist Party of China (CPC) continues to be a staunchly atheist organization. All Party members and employees on the state payroll are forbidden to wear religious attire such as Islamic head scarves and coverings (including the *doppa* cap for males),

or engage in religious practices such as fasting during Ramadan. While Article 36 of China's constitution guarantees 'religious freedom', in practice, individuals under the age of 18 are prohibited from entering religious places of worship such as churches, temples and mosques, and from praying in schools. The study of religious texts is permitted only in designated state schools (Hasmath 2011a). There are documented accounts of government informers regularly attending gatherings, sermons or prayers in local churches, temples and mosques (Fuller and Lipman 2004; Tam and Hasmath 2015).

Furthermore, Chinese authorities have slowly phased out the use of ethnic-minority languages as the primary medium of instruction in the majority of schools, replacing them with Mandarin Chinese as the dominant working language (Schluessel 2009). The reaction by some members of the Uyghur community in Xinjiang is one of resistance, even to the extent of potential violence. For example, in May 2014 a mass protest in front of government buildings in a township in Aqsu turned violent when participants beat the principal of a school and a township official, and threw stones at the buildings. State authorities generally respond that the shift to a near-universal use of Mandarin Chinese in schools ensures that ethnic minorities can compete on an equal footing with the Han in the labour market, and relatedly, to maximize their educational potential. Whether this strategy has been successful is another narrative, with mixed results regarding returns on education reported in the literature (see Hasmath 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011b; Howell 2013; Hasmath and Ho 2015; Cherg, Hasmath, and Ho 2016; MacDonald and Hasmath 2018).

Suffice it to say, these practices, in the aggregate, could lead to depriving ethnic-minority youths of a grounding in traditional ethno-cultural values. A lack of meaningful exposure to ethno-cultural group practices at a young age is likely to encourage ethnic minorities to adopt the secular ideology of the Chinese state, rather than to practice ethno-cultural group practices in adulthood (Zang 2015).<sup>3</sup> The pressure to adopt Han culture over a hybrid ethnic-minority/Han culture, or ethnic-minority culture on its own, is further exacerbated by the commodification of ethnic minorities (Hasmath 2014). Studies focusing on China's ethnic minorities and their interactions with the majority Han ethnic group have suggested that the modern Chinese state has a tendency to depict ethnic minorities as exotic practitioners of 'backward' traditions, prone to poverty and illiteracy. This is contrasted with the Han majority, who are seen as united, modern, and 'superior' (Gladney 1994; Blum 2001; Leibold 2009; Wangdu 2011; Cheung 2012). For the young ethnic-minority person, 'acting Han' is generally seen as the passport to social acceptance and higher status, given that it is perceived as a marker of sophistication and 'being modern' by Han; although Smith Finley (2007, 2013) suggests it could be viewed as shameful and traitorous by many in the Uyghur community.

The overall effects of state policies and practices on ethnic minorities, coupled with the growing numerical presence of Han Chinese in once ethnic-minority-dominated areas, has led to older ethnic minorities worrying that their offspring will be drawn away from their traditional ethno-cultural practices by the attraction of Han materialism. As one Uyghur woman commented in the aftermath of the July 2009 riots, the Han 'don't respect our lifestyle ... we want our dignity' (New York Times 2009).

While the scholarly evidence thus far correctly identifies ethno-cultural repression and ineffective state policies as the main culprits behind the rise of ethnic-minority tensions among Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the socio-economic dimension has not been thoroughly

investigated as a cause of the rise of ethnic tensions as hinted in the wider literature on larger ethnic conflicts in a non-Chinese context (Fearon and Laitin 2000; Miguel and Gugerty 2004; Habyarimana et al. 2007). This article focuses on this aspect via an in-depth exploration of Uyghurs' socio-economic integration – at the level of the labour market in an evolving market economy – and through the prism of their on-the-ground negotiation with rapid internal Han migration in Xinjiang's cities.

Two theories are particularly useful as a starting point to tie together ethnic minorities' socio-economic profile with growing and heightened ethno-cultural consciousness and ethnic tensions. Split labour market theory highlights how competition for jobs leads to friction between, and hence the political crystallization of, particular groups (Bonacich 1972; Wilson 1980). Conversely, labour segmentation theory illustrates capital's exploitation of group divisions for economic gain (Reich, Gordon, and Edwards 1973). It is worthwhile to test whether current labour market processes – involving agency (e.g. social capital, labour movement) and structure (e.g. market, institutions) – are shaping a split and/or segmented labour market in Xinjiang, which could contribute to increasing and heightened ethno-cultural consciousness. This scenario is complicated by the fact that Xinjiang's labour market has undergone a substantial transformation due to massive internal Han migration. Increasing numbers of Han migrants are heading into Xinjiang's cities, pushed by demographic pressures and pulled by economic structural transformation. In short, the article assesses whether ethnic tensions and violence are a manifestation and expression of an acute, rising ethno-cultural consciousness stemming from ethnic minorities' low socio-economic status in XUAR.

### **XUAR: state ethnic management and rising ethno-cultural consciousness**

The XUAR case is an apt environment to understand ethnic-minority–Han interactions playing out in the everyday, and the effects of state policies on ethnic minorities, and to delve deeper into the reasons for the rise of ethnic-minority tensions. Of the estimated 113.79 million ethnic minorities, constituting approximately 8.5% of the total population in the 2010 census, most have traditionally been concentrated in the resource-rich western areas of the nation (NBS/EAC 2012). Chief among these areas is XUAR, in China's north-west – occupying one-sixth of the total land area and holding one of the nation's largest and strategically important natural gas and oil reserves – where slightly over 10 million Uyghurs, a Turkic, mostly Sunni Muslim ethnic group, reside as the majority. As hinted earlier, exchanges between Uyghurs and the Han in the region have been tense as a result of historical and contemporary conflict between both parties.

The state's response to repeated expressions of Uyghur dissatisfaction in Xinjiang has consisted of oscillating soft and hard policy approaches. The soft policy approach is exemplified by funding the building and upkeep of mosques. According to the State Information Office there are over 20,000 mosques in Xinjiang, which makes this endeavour relatively significant. The state has also provided preferential policies in education for ethnic minorities, which consist of bursaries, scholarships, and university admissions based on lower examination scores (Hasmath 2011a; Hasmath and MacDonald 2018).

The hard policy approach is illustrated by the state's attempt to 're-educate' and 'reform' religious leaders to ensure that they do not advocate Islamic 'extremism' or 'illegal religious activities' as defined by the state, or to prevent leaders from forging

connections between the approximately 21 million Muslims in China (figure derived from China's State Administration for Religious Affairs). For the latter point, forging ethno-religious connections has been a starting point in other jurisdictions to foster a collective consciousness that creates division, ultimately leading to potential political mobilization (Giuliano 2000; Posner 2004). The Chinese state is keen to eliminate this possibility in Xinjiang.

The hard policy approach is fundamentally a security apparatus. There are strong efforts to clamp down on 'illegal' mosque constructions when the state perceives them to be a threat to security. In present-day XUAR there has been an increasingly visible security presence, exemplified by the rolling out of a grid-based 'social management system'. Essentially, communities in XUAR have been divided into zones, and a group of party members assigned to each zone, where they are tasked to monitor and conduct surveillance of various activities that are threatening, or potentially threatening, to 'social stability' (Mitchell 2015). In early 2014, the government announced that approximately 200,000 cadres will live with local communities in Xinjiang, making this a potentially large and significant undertaking (Luo 2014). In practice, there is no conformity in terms of how surveillance is conducted. It depends on the area. At the very least, Party members have relatively sophisticated technologies at their disposal if they elect to use them – and these seem to be employed more readily in urban areas. This may involve using riot-proof HD cameras, policing boxes, and 24-hour inspection routes. Furthermore, Uyghurs in both XUAR and across the nation are randomly targeted for surveillance and scrutiny by state authorities, who justify their actions by citing the need for increased security measures given the rise of visible conflict in the region, as illustrated earlier.

Coiled in this interaction between Uyghurs and the Han, there is a rising ethno-cultural consciousness, which often revolves around highlighting differences from the Han. As Gladney (1996) astutely noted two decades ago but is equally applicable today, Uyghurs subscribe to certain identities under highly contextualized moments of social relations. For example, the close link between Muslim and Uyghur identity has meant that any shifts by state authorities in regulating ethno-cultural practices, via varying soft or hard policies, has been a source of contention for Uyghurs. Smith Finley (2007) goes a step further than Gladney, outlining six ways ethno-cultural consciousness manifests on the ground: daily repetition of negative stereotypes of Han Chinese; symbolic, spatial and social segregation from Han Chinese; dissemination of alternative representation of Han/Uyghur as colonizer/colonized in the medium of popular Uyghur songs; the growth of orthodox Islam; a strengthened taboo against Uyghur–Han intermarriage; and a selective cosmopolitanism in which Uyghurs embrace Central Asian cultures. Through these strategies, Uyghurs are creating a discourse that rejects national unity and re-emphasizes ethno-cultural and social differences from the Han.

From the state's perspective, a rising ethno-cultural consciousness among Uyghurs, if not adequately dealt with, can exacerbate dissent and social unrest. This is the underlying thinking behind the state's soft and hard policy approaches, with a growing emphasis on the latter. Of course, as Smith Finley (2002, 156) rightly points out, religio-cultural differences did not prevent Uyghurs from interacting with the Han in the past when it was suitable.

## Migration and settlement patterns

On the establishment of XUAR in October 1955, the CPC instituted a programme of resettling Han in the region. The consequence is that Xinjiang's Han population steadily increased, from 3.6 million at the establishment of XUAR to 21.8 million in 2010. Put differently, XUAR's population grew at an average annual rate of  $\sim 2.9\%$ , when the corresponding figure nationally was  $\sim 1.5\%$ . In aggregate terms, between 1953 and 2010 the Han Chinese population increased their share of the region's total population from 6.1% to 40.1% (calculated using the Xinjiang Statistical Yearbooks). The sudden escalation of Han residents during this period has had two primary effects. First, there was unsustainable expansion of industry and accompanying urbanization. Second, Xinjiang did not experience severe food shortages during this time and therefore received an influx of internal migrants from other parts of China in search of food (Pannell and Ma 1997). Of course, the most basic manner to characterize Han migration to Xinjiang in the contemporary era is that it is generally an outcome of an orchestrated and systematic state effort to increase the population of Han Chinese in the region.

The Chinese have historically controlled Xinjiang through the construction of garrisons and urban settlements by encouraging Han migration (Gaubatz 1996; Van Wie Davis 2008). In this tradition, the CPC have continued to use such methods of control in tandem with agricultural settlements, taking the form of the still active Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) or Bingtuan, established in 1954, originally to employ demobilized troops. The XPCC is one of Xinjiang's three main administrative organs, and operates as an autonomous society with its own public security and judicial organs. In 1996, it was elevated to the same political status as the Xinjiang government (see Seymour 2000 for details). One of the practical consequences of consolidating power through this administrative setup is that it places Uyghurs in structural competition with the Han and other minority groups, consolidating political power in the hands of predominantly Han upper-level officials (Millward and Tursun 2004). For example, in 2009 the XPCC recruited approximately 894 civil servant positions, of which 744 were reserved for Han Chinese, 137 were unrestricted by ethnicity, 11 were earmarked for Uyghurs and 2 were reserved for Kazakhs. At present, an estimated 13% of Xinjiang's population is directly connected to the Bingtuan (see XPCC website), with an ethnic demographic breakdown of 88% Han Chinese ( $\sim 2.2$  million) and less than 7% Uyghurs ( $\sim 165,000$ ).

Xinjiang's Han Chinese also have a tendency to settle in the wealthier urban areas of northern Xinjiang, while Uyghurs tend to constitute the majority in rural areas and the poorer urban areas of southern Xinjiang. Officially, 80.8% of Uyghurs reside in rural areas, in comparison to 46.4% for Han Chinese; 9% and 10.1% of Uyghurs live in the town and city, respectively, with corresponding figures of 13% and 40.6% for the Han population (calculated using NBS/EAC 2003).<sup>4</sup> The strong Han presence in cities can be interpreted as a form of internal Han colonization through encirclement, or population swamping, in the region (Sautman 2000). Fuelling this interpretation are statistics that indicate that between 1991 and 2011, the Han presence in Xinjiang's urban areas increased at about 1.78%, with the corresponding rate for Uyghurs at  $-0.07\%$ . Han Chinese markedly increased their proportion in major cities, from 1991 to 2011, and by over 5% in Bortala, Qumul and Qorla. Qorla, whose economy largely relies on the oil and gas industries, is one of the three main centres of production in Xinjiang (the other two being Ürümqi

and Qaramay). Moreover, as [Table 1](#) suggests, between 1991 and 2010 Uyghurs' share of the urban population declined significantly in most major cities, notably those in the south and whose economies are highly dependent on agriculture.

The birth rate among the Uyghurs is almost four times that among the Han (NBS/EAC 2012). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the increase in the Han urban population principally results from internal migration. The Han bias in urbanization is a key demographic and development issue in Xinjiang. As Hasmath and Hsu (2007) argue in the case of the Tibet Autonomous Region, the urgent development issue for minorities is not population dominance, but access to the privileges of urban development, such as higher income. In Xinjiang, regional and ethnic inequality are worsening. Xinjiang's GDP per capita was 12th among China's 31 provinces and regions in 2000, and in 2012 it was 18th. The Han population is disproportionately concentrated in locations where average income is highest. There is a clear and significant correlation between GDP per capita and the proportion of Han residents, as [Tables 2](#) and [3](#) attest. In fact, every percentage point increase in the non-Han share of the population is associated with an expected decrease in GDP per capita of RMB 44 (~USD 6.60) (see Wiemer 2004 for calculations).

## The division of labour

The division of labour in Xinjiang is greatly shaped by migration and urbanization patterns. In particular, in the oasis settlements where the majority of Uyghurs reside, land is scarce, and the plots cultivated are too small to provide subsistence and work to the available labour force. As elsewhere in China, following the advent of the rural responsibility system, the agriculture sector was unable to absorb surplus labour (see Lin 1988; Zhang 2003 for details).

The structural forces underlying urbanization can be vividly illustrated by comparing GDP to labour share ratios. These indicate the relative productivity of labour in different industries, in terms of its value-added contribution to GDP. [Table 2](#) illustrates the labour shares (percentage of employed persons) and GDP to labour share ratios in the primary,

**Table 1.** Uyghur and Han Population Shares (%) in Urban XUAR, 1991–2011.

	Uyghurs			Han		
	1991	2000	2011	1991	2000	2011
Aqsu	46.01	38.07	50.92	52.73	60.06	47.46
Altay	2.63	2.80	2.16	59.60	54.55	59.34
Artush	81.76	79.75	79.01	6.22	8.10	9.06
Bortala	19.17	15.44	16.14	61.01	67.97	66.84
Changji	3.13	2.87	3.00	75.85	77.46	73.08
Qumul	26.17	21.19	21.43	65.94	71.73	70.94
Khotän	81.06	82.40	88.19	18.60	17.01	11.38
Qaramay	15.27	13.78	15.6	75.97	78.07	74.85
Kashgar	74.89	77.36	82.01	24.02	21.78	17.05
Qorla	32.29	26.36	25.78	64.52	69.84	70.46
Küytun	0.28	0.47	0.33	95.43	94.62	94.75
Shihezi	1.04	1.20	1.37	95.50	94.53	93.85
Tacheng	3.64	3.19	3.01	64.02	63.73	63.22
Turpan	72.67	70.38	72.38	19.48	21.95	20.25
Ürümchi	12.43	12.79	12.63	72.88	75.30	72.65
Ghulja	51.29	45.54	48.27	32.11	38.77	35.94

Source: Calculated using NBS/EAC (2003) and Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook (2012).

**Table 2.** Labour Shares in XUAR and Nationally (%).

	Year	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
XUAR	2000	21.1	39.5	39.4
	2011	17.2	48.8	34.0
China	2000	15.1	45.9	39.0
	2011	10.0	46.0	43.4

Source: Calculated using Xinjiang Population Census (2002) and Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook (2012).

secondary and tertiary industries in 2000 and 2011. The GDP/labour share ratio is highest in the secondary industry (which generally has higher capital inputs) – and this is increasingly the case from 2000 to 2011. Thus, the relative GDP contribution of one worker in this industry is higher than in the primary and tertiary industries. The value-added contribution includes wages and profits. In short, the high secondary and tertiary ratios reflect the relatively high salaries in these industries (approximately RMB 14,000 [~USD 2,100] per year). This is more than twice the primary industry (approximately RMB 6,500 [~USD 975] per year), which has particularly low remuneration. In XUAR, the secondary industries are more productive than in China as a whole – a gauge of the relative structural dominance of these industries in Xinjiang’s economic development.

The critical issue here is that while Uyghurs have a strong concentration in primary industries, Han dominate the secondary and tertiary industries (Table 3). Put another way, key strategic resources of the region such as electricity, gas, and water are managed by Han Chinese (odds ratio<sup>5</sup>: 0.06). The type and quality of jobs Uyghurs get is crucial in understanding this stratification. The Han have moved into the private sector – where minorities are not faring well – as the formal state and collective sector diminishes in economic importance. Total employment in work units has slumped drastically against a background where the total number of Xinjiang inhabitants of working age has grown. In 2000, 2,762,260 were ‘formal employees’ and 4,175,900 were ‘urban individuals’ or ‘rural labourers’ (Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2002). The minority share of employment in local state-owned enterprises (40.7% in 1991; 43.2% in 1996) greatly outweighs their share of employment in central state-owned enterprises (9.4% in 1991; 10.5% in 1996) (Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 1992, 1997). At the most rudimentary level, one will expect more ethnic parity at the central state-owned enterprise level than the ratios reported. Official statistics in later years do not differentiate minority shares by these divisions – speculatively, this may be because it highlights potential long-standing inequalities. Such figures, ignored in debates on internal Han colonialism in Xinjiang, are a potential sign of unequal distribution of political power.

The most recent Han Chinese inter-provincial migrants are spontaneous, and not part of state-directed population transfers. Their presence in urban areas and in high-status, high-paying occupations (defined in this instance as above the average annual wage of RMB

**Table 3.** Sectoral Distribution (%) by Ethnicity in XUAR.

	Uyghurs	Han	Other
Primary	59.87	25.13	15.00
Secondary	18.16	75.61	6.24
Tertiary	25.56	62.62	11.81

Source: Calculated using Xinjiang Population Census (2002). Due to a lack of publicly available statistics, it was not possible to calculate the corresponding 2011 figures.



10,278 [~USD 1,542] contributes to the perception of urban Xinjiang being an internal Han colony. As Table 4 illustrates, Han are over-represented in high-status and high-paying occupations: there, over 35% of the Han working population resides, in comparison to 13% for Uyghurs. On the other hand, Uyghurs are over-represented in agriculture, where over 80% of the group's working population is present (odds ratio: 4.66).

The transformation from a state-planned to a market-based economy in the 1980s and early 1990s slowly created an ownership structure in Xinjiang that shifted towards the private sector (see Dreyer 2000 for details). While the private sector is relatively weak in Xinjiang compared to other western provinces, its importance has grown rapidly, accounting for about 20% of the region's total GDP in 2003. Between 1995 and 2002, the urban state sector in Xinjiang shed 884,000 jobs, and its share in overall urban employment dropped from 80.6% to 59%. In contrast, Xinjiang's total number of *getihu* (private businesses with less than eight employees) and *siying qiye* (more than eight employees) has burgeoned (calculated using Xinjiang's Statistical Yearbooks). By December 2003, Xinjiang had 36,617 *siying qiye* employing 491,657 persons. This amounted to a rise of 31.1% in the number of private enterprises and 27.0% in the number of employees over the previous year. The number of *getihu* also increased over the same twelve months, to 449,911 (a 4.2% increase), employing some 706,556 persons (a 7.7% increase).

Uyghurs are faring relatively poorly in the private sector and are far less likely to be self-employed than Han. The private sector attracts many Han internal migrants, as does the XPCC. For this reason, one may be inclined to recommend that reducing the size of the XPCC would also reduce pressure on local employment by reducing the large population of itinerant Han migrant workers. While this recommendation might be fruitful, deeper processes linked to the marketization of the economy, and social networks that

**Table 4.** Occupation Sector Concentration and Odds Ratio by Ethnicity in XUAR.

Occupational sector		Uyghur	Han	Odds ratio (Uyghur/Han)*
High-status, high-paying occupations		%	%	
	Banking, security and insurance	0.06	0.52	0.43
	Scientific research and technical Services	3.33	3.80	0.77
	Electricity, gas and water	0.43	1.76	0.06
	Public management and social organization	2.54	4.84	0.28
	Health, social security and social welfare	0.04	0.46	0.01
	Education and culture, sports and entertainment	2.09	7.38	0.08
	Geologic prospecting and management of water conservancy	0.51	6.92	0.01
	Restaurant and retail trade	4.04	12.83	0.10
Low-status, low-paying occupations	Other professions	0.39	1.13	0.12
	Real estate	0.26	1.48	0.03
	Transport, storage and post	1.26	5.51	0.05
	Manufacturing	3.79	12.80	0.09
	Mining	0.39	2.28	0.03
	Construction	0.27	0.97	0.08
	Farming, forestry and animal	80.60	37.32	4.66

Source: Calculated using NBS/EAC (2003). This was the last publicly available data set to calculate occupational sector concentration by ethnicity.

\*The odds ratio compares the odds of working in an occupational sector [ $p(\text{outcome}) / (1 - p(\text{outcome}))$ ] for Uyghurs (numerator) and Han (denominator). An odds ratio of 1 indicates group equity; an odds ratio  $> 1$  indicates that Uyghurs are more likely to work in that particular occupational sector; an odds ratio value  $< 1$  indicates that Uyghurs are less likely to work in that occupational sector. Occupational categories are set by the National Bureau of Statistics.

manufacture social exclusion, must be fully factored in with respect to any recommendations for change, as the following sections suggest.

### Marketization and the rise of ethno-cultural consciousness

Given the current migration, urbanization and economic patterns, one may conclude that there is a growing Han internal colony in Xinjiang's political economy. To attribute this reality entirely to state policy may not be entirely accurate. State policy does not overtly perpetuate an ethnic division of labour, notwithstanding the XPCC civil servant hiring practices. Indeed, there are numerous state preferential policies in school admissions (Hasmath 2008, 2011b), which in theory could increase the chances of Uyghurs for higher-status and higher-paying occupations. Moreover, when both Uyghurs and the Han are abundant in low-status and low-paying occupations (91% and 75%, respectively), the lack of an ethnic division of labour diminishes ethnic solidarity. Arguably, what is increasing ethnic solidarity and consciousness among Uyghurs in particular is the effects of the marketization of an emerging capitalist economy in XUAR.

As Hasmath's (2008, 2011a) research illustrates, in spite of having higher educational attainment, minority nationalities generally have lower employment rates and wages than their Han counterparts. In general, Han tend to use their social networks to find higher-status and higher-paying occupational opportunities in greater proportions than minorities – two-thirds of all positions found by Han were found in this fashion, whereas the corresponding figure for minority nationalities was one-twelfth of all positions found. Similar processes are at work in Xinjiang. Under a socialist mode of production the state was compelled to integrate Uyghurs, and was able to accomplish it by providing 'iron rice bowl' (*tie fan wan*) jobs in state-owned and collective-owned enterprises.<sup>6</sup> Essentially, in Xinjiang as well as the rest of China, there was an institutional system of 'organized dependence' (Walder 1986), whereby the individual was tied to their work unit for life, in exchange for secure employment, irrespective of ethnicity. However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, after nearly a decade of market reforms, the job assignment system was abandoned. Individuals were now urged to create jobs for themselves and seek employment in an emerging private sector. In fact, as noted earlier, most new hires in Xinjiang now occur in the private sector, rendering government preferential policies too weak to control occupational stratification (see Iredale et al. 2001 for discussion). A 2001 high-level investigation report of the Xinjiang CPC Committee candidly disclosed that

the strategy of choosing from both sides [Han and Uyghurs] in hiring has been more challenged following the establishment and perfecting of the market economic system. ... The power of intervention of the government has continuously decreased ... and the difficulty of finding a job for minority labourers has become bigger ... and implementing equal opportunities measures has become less practicable. (quoted in Becquelin 2004, 375)

In effect, such social networks are embedded in labour market behaviour to the degree that it ultimately produces sectoral ethnic-group divisions. As demonstrated in Table 4, there is a tendency for Uyghurs to hold low-status and low-paying positions, particularly in the service sector, while Han occupy positions in high-wage, capital-intensive industries.

The ethnic-group divisions in the labour market may run deeper. For instance, many Uyghurs conduct business only with fellow Uyghurs; and vice versa, Han with fellow Han (Gilley 2001). Such behaviour significantly reduces both sides' income, and unequally affects Uyghurs, given the tendency for the group to be in lower-status and lower-paying occupations. In this way, disproportionate access to the local economy as a result of market forces, migration patterns and social networks creates and reinforces spatial divisions, since wages can also determine residential location. Uyghurs and Han reside in relatively closed ethnic communities and seldom meaningfully interact with each other (see Cao 2010 for discussion). Their living conditions are also poorer than those of Han, as a result of their lower incomes. This does not bode well for economic, social and political integration of Uyghurs in the short or long term, and will only intensify perceived (or real) differences between Han and Uyghurs, thus reinforcing ethno-cultural tensions.

## Discussion and conclusion

Split labour market and labour segmentation theories' assumptions are seemingly apt in the XUAR case. The evidence suggests that there is an inherent antagonism in Xinjiang's economy, which is negotiated by Uyghur and Han actors through the use of social capital to obtain employment. As rapid urbanization continues, market relations could further precipitate a sectoral division of labour to the extent that the labour market is skewed towards Han domination of high-status and high-wage positions, and Uyghur domination of low-status and low-wage positions, in aggregate. Since occupational stratification can involve competition between Han and Uyghurs, leading to the exclusion of one group from the rewards of economic development, this inevitably increases inter-ethnic-group tensions. Put differently, the current labour market processes involving agency and structure are shaping a split and segmented labour market in Xinjiang, which in the case of the Uyghurs is a primary source of rising ethno-cultural consciousness.

The consequences of the rising ethno-cultural consciousness created by a split and segmented labour market can be understood in two ways. The first treats the Uyghur situation in Xinjiang as a struggle between the dominant state and the oppressed minority group. The second attributes group conflict to intense competition for resources and educational and labour market opportunities. As Schein (2000) and Hsu and Hasmath (2013) note, the corporatist Chinese state is often conceived as much stronger than society. Under this guise, ethnic-minority issues are often treated as identity struggles, in which the state is usually conflated with the Han majority while the minorities are aligned with 'civil society'. The socio-economic dimensions of inter-ethnic tensions and conflict, while recognized, are attributed to the colonizing intentions or inadequacies of the state (Moneyhon 2004). Everyday social processes such as ethnic divisions of labour and migration are given short shrift.

It is the contention of this article that Xinjiang's socio-economic environment is an appropriate context in which to understand Uyghur–Han conflict. Institutional changes have loosened peasants from their tie to the land of their birth and given rise to the rural-to-urban migration of Uyghurs and Han in disproportionate numbers. Amid such threatening developments, migrants rely on their group or hometown connections for an entry into urban life. Social processes like employment discrimination (Hasmath

2011b) and exploitation of labourers have greater propensity in such a structure, often to the disadvantage of the Uyghur. They therefore sharpen divisions of labour and capital, perpetuating socio-cultural segregation in the urban space. As the article suggests, inter-ethnic-group tensions – and rising ethno-cultural consciousness in the case of Uyghurs – ensues from the fact that the group's job options are limited to low-status and low-paying positions.

Tensions between Uyghurs and Han Chinese are not simply a reaction against the state, which is often seen as an internal colonizer, but rather a set of social exchanges forged by Uyghurs and Han, using a subjective cost–benefit analysis. On the one hand, Uyghur resentment is directed at what is perceived to be a largely Han state that is protectionist towards the Han majority – indeed, Han cadres outnumber minority cadres in Xinjiang. On the other hand, underlying tensions are exacerbated by unregulated labour markets and the ensuing inter- and intra-group competition and living conditions under which Xinjiang's Uyghur poor subsist. The same segregated and segmented labour markets bind Uyghurs together and arguably are part and parcel of the increasing Uyghur ethno-cultural consciousness.

Ironically, economic incentives continue to be one of the main tools Chinese authorities use to manage the Uyghur population, a policy belied by their poor economic performance in the labour market compared to Han. This was one of the key aspects stressed in the Central Work Forum on Xinjiang in 2014.<sup>7</sup> The underlying idea behind authorities' strong belief in this strategy is that Uyghurs primarily want a comfortable economic material life for themselves and their offspring – a reasonable premise for any group in any society. However, complications arise – in spite of improved labour market performance among Uyghurs following market reforms – as this reality has not come to pass when using Han experiences as a gauge for success, which many Uyghurs do. Uyghurs continue to watch the better-paying jobs go to Han Chinese while the more labour-intensive, poorly paid positions are skewed towards Uyghurs.

Until the inequalities between the Han and Uyghurs have been corrected in the labour market, Uyghur ethno-cultural consciousness will be heightened, and Uyghur–Han Chinese conflict will continue to play a significant role in the history of Xinjiang. In the short term, ethnic tensions will be suppressed, as has been done in the past, through hard policies with a strong securitization bent. However, soft policies will eventually be re-employed. In the long term, neither the soft nor the hard policies currently practised will address the main reasons for the ethno-cultural tensions between Uyghurs and Han. Left unattended, this will tragically lead to increasing acts of sporadic inter-ethnic conflict in the future.

## Notes

1. This figure was reported by Radio Free Asia, whereby the majority killed were Han Chinese workers. The incident was only acknowledged by Chinese state media two months later, when it was reported by the Tianshan web portal that 16 people were killed and 18 others were injured.
2. While there is a lively scholarly debate on the utility of using 'ethnic minorities', 'ethnic groups' (*zuqun*) and minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*) in China (Ma 2001; Maurer-Fazio and Hasmath 2015), until academic consensus is reached this article will employ the three terms with similar intentionality.

3. Grose (2010) finds mixed results of Sinification when looking at middle-school Uyghurs in Han-dominated classrooms in eastern China.
4. The legacy of the *hukou* (household registration) system, instituted in 1958, must be factored in creating this demographic urban–rural discrepancy among Uyghurs. In the *hukou* system, all individuals must be registered in the locale where they commonly reside – categorized further as either ‘non-agricultural’ (urban) or ‘agricultural’ (rural) – and entitlements such as housing, education and employment rights are administered accordingly. As a consequence, the *hukou* system has to a great extent controlled the frequency of rural-to-urban migration (see Wu and Treiman 2004 for details).
5. Unlike measures of difference, odds ratios are not influenced by ceiling and floor effects.
6. Although the state provided secure employment for one’s working life, it was quite common for many to be severely under-employed in both state-owned and collective-owned enterprises. That is, there was under-utilization of labour on two fronts: an individual’s high skills might not match their occupational tasks, which often occurred since the labour market did not clear using wage adjustments; and state-owned and collective-owned enterprises were overstaffed (Hasmath 2011b).
7. To boost employment and income levels for Uyghurs, the Central Work Forum on Xinjiang proposed to increase fiscal transfers. However, this does not necessarily increase the odds of Uyghurs obtaining high-status and high-paying jobs. Moreover, the forum’s recommendation to increase urbanization and interregional migration, while a good step in principle, often means more Han migration, rather than ethnic-minority migration, into urban Xinjiang. In fact, many Uyghurs are migrating out of Xinjiang to look for jobs elsewhere in China. Finally, the last major recommendation, to ‘strengthen state education’, while important, may have little effect, given that Uyghurs have difficulties obtaining ‘good jobs’ (read: high-status and high-paying) in spite of having high education, that is, they are rejected for their ethnicity alone (Hasmath 2011b).

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