Mummy dearest: questions of identity in modern and ancient Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

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Questions of identity in modern and ancient Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

By

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Table of Contents

List of figures and images

I: Introduction – Contested histories

II: Desert, but not deserted – The ancient Tarim Basin

Cruel, yet kind: the two faces of the Taklamakan Desert
Desert life in the Neolithic
Bronze Age settlements
Qawrighul
Hami
Zaghunlug
Subeshi
The big picture

III: Lie to me – Uyghur nationalism and historical narrative

Xinjiang and its Uyghurs
There’s no place like home: ethnonationalism and the ethnic homeland
Mother’s land: a narrative of Uyghur ancestry

IV: Conclusion – From whence we came

References
List of Figures & Images

Images

1. Lopnur timber rings (Barber 1999:83) ................................................................. 11
2. Beauty of Loulan (Wang 1999:45) ................................................................. 13
3. Baby Blue (Wang 1999:76) ........................................................................ 17
4. Cherchen Man/ Ur-David (Barber 1999:65) ................................................. 19
5. Artistic depiction of the Beauty of Loulan (Allen 1996) ............................. 53

Figures

1. Distribution of bodies in Cherchen Man burial (Barber 1999:44) ........ 18
2. Stratigraphy of Cherchen Man burial shaft (Barber 1999:46) ................. 18
4. Diffusion of Hallein/Hallstatt weaving technology (Barber 1999:135) .. 23
5. Craniometric analysis of Tarim mummies (Han 1994) ............................ 24
7. Xinjiang population analysis (Teague 2009:42) ..................................... 29
8. Cross-border influences on Xinjiang oases (Rudelson 1997:41) .......... 31
9. Xinjiang resource map (Teague 2009:42-43) ......................................... 33
10. Political states and ethnic groups (Connor 1994:77) ............................ 37
11. Xinjiang ethnic prefectures (Rossabi 2004:119) ..................................... 45
The sense of ‘whence we came’ is central to the definition of ‘who we are’

-Anthony Smith (1991:22)
I: Introduction – Contested histories

In 1988 Victor Mair, Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, turned the corner of the China’s Urumchi Museum and found himself in a gallery filled with the most exquisite, lifelike mummies. The mummies were so captivating that the professor promptly abandoned the tour he was supposed to be giving to a group of Smithsonian scholars and spent the entire afternoon completely enthralled by the collection. The most fascinating aspect of these mummies was not just that they were nearly 4,000 years old, but that they were 4,000 years old and looked decidedly non-Chinese. One, according to Mair, was a spitting image of his own brother (Mallory and Mair 2000).

After being rediscovered by Mair in an annex of the Urumchi museum, these mummies burst into the international news arena with shocking headlines like *Mummies found in Chinese desert hold secrets to story of humanity* (Smith 1996). The mummies, recovered from the outskirts of China’s Taklamakan Desert, appear to be Caucasian. The mummies’ red hair, long noses, and high cheekbones are rewriting history, with big implications for the region’s present-day residents.

China is a country whose national identity and history is based on the belief that its civilization evolved in complete isolation from the West. Their narrative holds that this isolation was not broken until the development of the Silk Roads. Preserved in the Taklamakan Desert of Western China for over 3,000 years, these mummies suggest that the exchange of culture and trade between the East and West began long before the Silk Roads. Their entrance into the public eye has not only prompted questions from scholars
about the history of Eurasia and its people, but also called into doubt the validity of China’s claim over the region. According to Mair, "If you went to see the mummy in the museum, a Uighur would come up to you and whisper proudly, 'She's our ancestor.' It became a political hot potato" (Demick 2010).

The mummies were exhumed from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China (Wang 1999). This desert area is home to a predominately Muslim, Turkic-speaking people known as the Uyghurs. The Uyghurs have been engaged in a long, sometimes violent, struggle for political autonomy against the central Chinese government. Some Uyghurs believe that the only solution to this struggle is the formation of an independent Turkic state. These separatists have put forth their demand for independence based on the claim that China has no ancestral right to the Xinjiang region (Bovingdon 2010). This claim rests on the fact that the mummies exhumed from within this region have distinct European, rather than Han, features, much like many Uyghurs. The Uyghurs have constructed a national narrative in which they are the direct descendents of the Xinjiang mummies, which grants them historical precedence to the Xinjiang region, as it is their ancestral homeland, according to the narrative (Wang 1999). To the Uyghurs, the past has become an integral part of the present. The Tarim mummies are influencing concepts of identity in the Tarim Basin today, uniting the Uyghur population under a singular ancestry and nationalist cause.

Given that these two stories, those of the once living mummies and now living Uyghurs, have become intertwined, a separate examination of each narrative is necessary before it can be shown how one influences the other. Therefore, this thesis will be organized in two separate sections. The first will deal with the past: the culture and
history of the Tarim mummies. The second section will look to the present, recounting the more recent history of the Uyghur people and analyzing the ‘Uyghur identity’. Then I will illustrate the ways in which modern Uyghurs are employing the archaeology of their homeland in order to negotiate their political world.

In the first section I will introduce the phenomenon of the Tarim mummies. When analyzed on a case-by-case basis, the mummies seem like a muddle of sites and burials. However, if one looks at the entire assemblage of Bronze Age burials from the Tarim Basin, several patterns of cultural and burial practices come into view. Of equal importance is that they all provide physical evidence for an ancient Caucasoid population that was well established by the Bronze Age, which would suggest that the early settlers of the Tarim Basin were clearly not Han Chinese. All around the fringe of the Taklamakan, where oases provide some respite from the harsh desert, there were communities of people who, based on their mummies, seem to have had a European origin (Barber 1999; Mallory and Mair 2000).

According to the Uyghurs, the Chinese were not the primary occupants of central Asia, and thus do not have a historical claim to the territory. To China’s central government, the Tarim mummies present an ideological challenge, because they empower the Uyghurs by giving them precedent for ethnic independence. The Uyghurs finally have what they believe to be scientific proof that they are not related to the Han majority, and that they should therefore be given autonomy from Communist China. To conclude this section, I will assess the legitimacy of the Uyghur’s claimed ancestral relationship to the mummies.
Having given the ancient populations of the Tarim Basin a thorough examination, I will then delve into the struggle of the modern Uyghur people vis-à-vis the central Chinese government. Communist China refutes Xinjiang’s demand for separatism by touting the historical narrative that Xinjiang always has been, and therefore always will be, a part of China. In the second segment of this thesis I will examine the developing ‘Uyghur identity’ through the lens of ethnonational theory, and discuss how the ethnic narrative constructed by the Uyghurs employs the mummies as a means to gain control of the Xinjiang region (Connor 1994; Smith 1991).

The mummies of the Tarim Basin have become an integral part of the Uyghur separatist identity, empowering them to seek independence based on the claim that the Caucasoid mummies prove Xinjiang was the ancestral homeland of a Turkic, not Chinese, people. Finally, with an understanding of the stories of both the ancient Tarim Basin population and the present, I will analyze the entrance of the mummies into the ethnonational arena.

The Beauty of Loulan, one of the oldest and most exquisitely preserved of the mummies, has been made the face of the separatist movement. Her image adorns posters calling for revolution, and a popular pop song was written in her honor (Allen 1996). The Uyghurs have dubbed her the ‘mother of the nation.’ The history of these ancient peoples has become embroiled in the politics of a living nation in a perfect example of how the past is never wholly divorced from the present. Regardless of the truth to their claimed descent from the Xinjiang mummies, the Uyghurs are manipulating the mummies to gain power in their political dispute against Communist China. The relationship between the
mummies, China, and the Uyghurs is an excellent opportunity to examine the process of an emerging national identity.
II: Desert but not deserted – The ancient Tarim Basin

Evidence of human habitation in the Tarim Basin appears as early as the Neolithic. However, it is not until the Bronze Age that widespread physical evidence of an established population begins to appear. Once sedentary population centers developed in oases around the fringes of the Taklamakan Desert and community cemeteries were established, a cultural continuity of burial practices becomes evident. This desert, one of the most arid environments on the planet, allowed for a remarkable state of preservation of these human burials. The resulting mummies, along with some of their burial customs, suggest that the Tarim Basin was populated by a people who either migrated into the region from, or had a network of exchange with, continental Europe. Evidence such as grave goods, textiles, technology and cultural practices, most of which is derived from the Bronze Age cemeteries of Qawrighul, Hami, Zaghnuliqu and Subeshi, help archaeologists to locate these mysterious ancient Caucasians within the larger Eurasian cultural landscape (Barber 1999; Mallory and Mair 2000).

Cruel, yet kind: the two faces of the Taklamakan Desert

The Taklamakan Desert, considered to be one of the least hospitable places on earth, stretches nine hundred and sixty kilometers across western China’s Tarim Basin. Receiving a mere 15 millimeters of rain per year on average in some regions, and with daily temperatures that can range from over 47.8°C during the day to negative 30°C at night, it is not difficult to see how that claim can be made (Rudelson 1997). In spite of
This, mankind has made this desert home since at least 8,000 BCE, tending its herds and farming the emerald oases scattered around the otherwise barren landscape (Barber 1999).

However harsh it may have been to the living, the desert is phenomenally kind to the dead, releasing back into the arms of the living ancient bodies which many have remarked look so alive they appear to simply have fallen asleep in the sands. It is the desert’s harsh climate that makes such beautiful preservation possible. The sands and soil of the Taklamakan Desert are the remains of an ancient inland sea. Ancient textiles expert Elizabeth Barber notes that many of these corpses are buried in the salt flats distributed across the basin (1999). The salinity simultaneously removes moisture from the bodies of the deceased and prevents microorganisms from having their usual effect on human remains¹ (Barber 1999).

Chinese archaeologist Wang Binghua suggested that the preservation might also be attributed to a seasonal factor (Mallory and Mair 2000; Wang 1999). The fact that most of the mummies seem to have been bundled very snugly in heavy wool and felt garments, which provides evidence that the bodies best preserved could have been buried during the cooler winter months and that this lower temperature, coupled with high salinity, provided excellent conditions for preservation (Wang 1999).

The high salinity of the corpses’ final resting place also has the beneficial side effect of not only preserving, but also brightening, the dyes of many of the textiles associated with the burials (Barber 1999). Barber hypothesized that the deceased may

¹ Ordinarily, after death the digestive bacteria ravage the internal portions of the body, producing waste gases and fluids which cause the body to swell radically. The mummy gape, which historically was dramatized as the last dying scream of an individual who suffered a particularly painful death, is caused by the pressure of these gases (Mallory and Mair 2000). Egypt is an excellent example of a region where ancient peoples have taken efforts to counteract this decomposition process, by removing many of the internal organs and inserting drying agents into the body’s cavities. In the case of the Tarim mummies, the desert’s naturally high salinity has done the job naturally.
have been interred in these salt flats because the soil had a salinity which was too high to be productive for agriculture, and thus there would have been no waste of arable land as a cemetery (1999). Whatever the reason, modern archaeologists are eternally grateful for the remarkable preservation of these ancient mummies².

**Desert life in the Neolithic**

The earliest evidence of peoples occupying the Tarim Basin comes from the Neolithic. Microliths, and the occasional pieces of pottery that weather from the sands of the Taklamakan, point to populations dating to sometime around 9000-8000 BCE. These were probably mobile communities that relied on hunting, fishing, and maybe stock-keeping to survive in the desert ecosystem of the Tarim Basin. They may have practiced some agriculture, but populations of that time are not known to have possessed the irrigation technology that would have been necessary to support extensive cultivation in that type of environment (An 1992a).

**Bronze Age settlements**

The earliest mummified remains do not appear in this region until the Bronze Age, about 2000 BCE (Mallory and Mair 2000). The Bronze Age illustrates a shift in the lifestyle of the Tarim people. Domesticated wheat and barley appear at sites, indicating that agriculture had taken a firm root in the desert. Stock keeping, of which there was

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² As a side note to the reader, since many of these bodies were preserved solely as a result of the desiccating effects of the desert and not from intentional preparation of the corpses after death, they are more accurately described as desiccated corpses than “mummies.” There are some examples of cases where the deceased were intentionally treated to aid in preservation, such as the Beauty of Loulan. These examples will be discussed later in the text. Since the term “mummies” has become so ingrained in the literature surrounding these peoples and their archaeology, they will frequently be referred to as mummies within this text.
some evidence in the Neolithic, is confirmed by the remains of domesticated sheep. Metallurgy, from which this prehistoric period takes its name, is also evident in the archaeological record (An 1992b). Taken together, alongside the presence of community cemeteries, these changes indicate the development of regional population centers, permanent communities settled around desert oases that could potentially have given rise to the later fortified hamlets recorded along the Silk Roads (Zhang 1992).

**Qawrighul**

The Qawrighul or “Gully of the Ancient Graves”, located in the Lopnur region of the eastern Tarim Basin, is considered the earliest of the region’s Bronze Age settlements. The cemetery, located 70 kilometers west of the ancient salt lake Lop Nur, houses the earliest Caucasoid mummies in the region, dating to 2000-1550 BCE. Of the 42 burials located within the cemetery, the remains of only two individuals, an adult female and a child, are preserved well enough to be dubbed mummies. The mummified woman was about twenty when she died. She was found wrapped in a wool blanket, with fur lined leather shoes and a felt cap, a death ensemble which appears to be very consistent among the burials of this area (Mallory and Mair 2000). Only her head was properly preserved, but its blonde hair and eyebrows are exciting enough to make the mummy worth mentioning (Wang 1999). In addition, there are two round dots of red ochre painted on her forehead, an act which was repeated in other burials (Mallory and Mair 2000).

Even those graves without intact corpses yield important archaeological data. The burials can be separated into two distinct types. The first category, into which 36 of the burials fall, consists of vertical pits. The bodies of the deceased are placed in an extended
position in a poplar coffin at the bottom of a pit. The top of the burial is then sealed off with animal skins, woven carpet, or a basket shaped cover. The remaining six burials, all male, were also buried at the base of vertical pits, but were differentiated above ground by seven concentric rings of wooden stakes [see image 1]. These rings radiate from the center of the burial shaft between 50 and 60 meters in diameter.

Archaeologists have speculated that the patterns of these rings could reflect some sort of solar worship, a common phenomenon among northern minorities in Chinese history (Wang 1999). Wang also remarks that the posts help to stabilize the shifting sands, which would have made it possible for ancient grave diggers to hollow out a vertical pit for the dead (Wang 1999). The individuals interred wore only leather shoes and, in the absence of clothes, were wrapped in blankets before being buried. Their necks and wrists were adorned with jade ornaments (Mallory and Mair 2000).

The goods associated with these burials support the changing lifestyle in the Bronze Age which was mentioned previously. Small wheat baskets, found in multiple burials, represent the sedentary, agriculture-based lifestyle adopted by the community. Other containers found were made of wood and woven grass. Qawrighul, in contrast to other cemeteries in the area, had no evidence of ceramic goods. Stockbreeding of cattle, sheep, horses, goats, and camels appears to have continued alongside the rise in
agriculture. Their domesticated food sources were supplemented by game such as deer, wild sheep, fish and birds. The diet of these East Central Asia peoples contrasts sharply with that of their East Asian neighbors, who relied primarily on a diet of millet and pork (Mallory and Mair 2000). This difference indicates that technology and ideas were most likely introduced from the west, spreading east across the Tarim Basin. This concept that the populations of the Tarim Basin migrated into the basin from a western origin, and its significance in identifying the origins of the Tarim cultures, will be discussed later in the section.

The graves also provide evidence for the development of many handcraft technologies. These include leather working, weaving and felting wool\(^3\), and working jade, wood and bone. Metallurgy is demonstrated within this community by axe marks on coffin planks and wooden posts, although it could have been introduced via trade and not actually produced in that area. Hordes of bronze weaponry and tools of the same dates have been recovered in association with the Andronovo steppe culture to the northwest of the basin (Mallory and Mair 2000).

Accompanying the graves were six carved female figures, five of wood and one of stone (Wang 1999). The tool marks found on the wooden figures again provides evidence for metallurgy, as they were made by a sharp whittling instrument. The presence of the carved figures in the cemetery could have a religious significance. Wang suggests that they demonstrate a cultural reverence for women (1999). Small bags of *Ephedra sinica*, found in some of the burials, have been assigned a medico-religious

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\(^3\) Sheep had not been introduced to East Asia by this time, meaning that weaving and felting wool was not a technology the mummies shared with their neighbors to the east. Felting is a technique common to steppe nomads because it does not require the use of a loom, highlighting the possibility that the mummies entered the Tarim Basin from the steppe region, a theory which will be discussed later in the chapter (Barber 1999).
purpose by archaeologists (Mallory and Mair 2000). Barber asserts that the presence of ephedra in burials links the mummies to ancient Indo-Iranian culture that used an herbal hallucinogen and stimulate combination to enter the spirit world in trances, and to send their deceased to the spirit world (1999). Ephedra is a stimulant, and could be a cultural-holdover from this western cultural ritual (Barber 1999).

One of the most famous Tarim mummies, the Beauty of Loulan as she is popularly known to archaeologists and laypeople alike, was found in a similar burial near the Qawrighul cemetery, on the banks of the Towan River. Her fame comes from her excellent state of preservation, all the way down to her beautifully preserved, long eyelashes [see image 2]. She was between 40 and 45 years old at the time of her death, and would have been approximately 1.56 meters tall in life. She has long (30 centimeters) blondish-brown hair that was bundled within a headdress made of felt and adorned with goose feathers. She was buried dressed in a wool shroud and fur-lined leather boots. Due to the phenomenal preservation of her body, archaeologists can determine that in life the Beauty of Loulan may not have been in very good health.
Examination of her body turned up extensive head and pubic lice, as well as nits in her eyelashes and eyebrows, a volume of which Chinese scientists concluded would be nearly intolerable. Her lungs were smothered with charcoal and silicate dust, originating from fire smoke and wind-blow sand. Her body was found in a shallow, one meter deep pit. Her face and upper body were covered with a large woven winnowing basket, and her burial was covered by thirty centimeters of dried branches, ten centimeters of reeds, and another ten centimeters of branches. Inside her grave were a comb and a long, narrow straw basket (Mallory and Mair 2000; Wang 1999).

The Beauty of Loulan, being one of the oldest and most strikingly well preserved mummies exhumed from the Taklamakan Desert, has captured the love of the Tarim Basin residents, as well as the attention of the western world. Her mummy was especially well publicized internationally. The Beauty of Kroran will become immensely important in a later section of this thesis, when I discuss how these mummies influence ideas of identity in the modern-day Tarim Basin.

There are several other mummies related to the Qawrighul cemetery that are no longer available to archaeologists, but they demonstrate the wide spread consistency of the burial practices seen at Qawrighul. Nearly a century prior to the modern mummy findings, several European explorers reported similarly preserved individuals. Sir Aurel Stein, employed by the British government, and Sven Hedin and Folke Bergman, a team from Sweden, found several mummies in the early 1900s, but they reburied them in the desert sands rather than transporting them back to Western Europe (Barber 1999; Bergman 1935).
Even without the physical mummies, it is clear that there was a continuity of burial practices in this time and place. Stein uncovered a male mummy also buried in a wooden coffin wrapped only in a woolen shroud and wearing leather footwear (Mallory and Mair 2000). Bergman and Hedin found an old woman in a wooden coffin with a feathered cap similar to the Beauty of Loulan.

“She wore a yellow pointed felt cap with red cords; her brow was high and noble, her eyes slightly closed, as if she were on the point of falling asleep; she had a fine aquiline nose and thin lips, slightly parted, a showing a glimpse of the teeth in a quiet, timeless smile. How long had this ‘Lady of the Inscrutable Smile’ defied the roaring sandstorms of the desert, how often had she listened to the whistling of the wind in this ‘Columned Hall of the Dead’, how long was it since she closed her eyes forever to the dazzling and burning sunlight?” [Bergman 1935:47].

It is worth noting a few additional similarities between her burial and other mummies previously mentioned: she too had bags of the plant ephedra and was wrapped in a mantle of wool (Mallory and Mair 2000).

**Hami**

Another cemetery, outside the city of Hami, contained 11 complete corpses, which were radiocarbon dated to between 1400-800 BCE (Mallory and Mair 2000). The best preserved of these mummies was named the “Ravishing Redhead” for her long reddish-brown braid. At the time of her death, around the age of 35, she would have been about 1.6 meters tall. She is described as having “a narrow face, deep set eyes, sharp nose, and thin lips” (Mallory and Mair 2000:188). Her hair, for which she is so notable, revealed through trace-element analysis that she had high amounts of calcium in her body,
potentially from a disease such as hyperparathyroidism that removes calcium from the bones and releases it into the blood system (Mallory and Mair 2000).

Other mummies from this area include a forty year old man with long reddish-brown hair. He is of note because his bronze earrings and long fingernails indicate that he was probably of a high social status and was not required to do hard physical work (Mallory and Mair 2000). This evidence is indicative of social differentiation within the culture, a trait that implies that a culture was socially stratified based on individual possession of private wealth. Another mummy, female, is pointed out by Mallory and Mair has having a pronounced European overbite, hinting at a European ancestry (2000). Yet another young woman can be distinguished by her elaborate tattoos, this time in blue (Mallory and Mair 2000). Tattooing appears to be a widespread cultural practice within the ancient Tarim Basin populations.

**Zaghunluq**

In the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age period there is a greater proportion of well preserved full-body mummies. One of these mummies is solely responsible for turning Asian language scholar Victor Mair into the primary expert on the Tarim mummy phenomena.

“Although he swiftly became familiar with all of them, the mummy Victor remembers best from that initial encounter [at the Urumchi Museum in 1988] was the one (commonly known as ‘Charchan Man’) whom he came to call fondly ‘Ur-David’. ‘Ur’ means ‘primal’ or ‘earliest’ and ‘David’ refers to his second-oldest brother; the resemblance between the two gentlemen is startling. ‘Ur-David’ was sleeping peacefully in the far-right corner of the room. He was lying on his back, his head propped up on a white pillow, his knees raised slightly, and his expressive hands – held
together by a friendship bracelet twisted from red and blue yarn – placed gently upon his abdomen... he could do nothing but stare fixedly into those ancient eyes. They were blissfully closed, yet they spoke eloquently and powerfully” [Mallory and Mair, 2000:9-10].

While this quote speaks more to the romance of the mummies, which will be analyzed later, than the archaeology of them, it does illustrate how arresting the state of these later mummies’ preservation is.

Ur-David was one of several mummies found in the Zaghunluq cemetery outside the town of Cherchen, dated to between 1000-600 BCE. When the cemetery was excavated in 1985 by Uyghur archaeologist Dolkun Kamberi, the site had been trashed by tomb looters, a significant problem faced by archaeologists in China. Of the five tombs Kamberi opened, only two were unlooted. The first was a shallow shaft containing a willow coffin. Encased within the coffin was a three to six month old infant, swaddled in wool, accompanied to the afterlife by a drinking horn and a sewn-up sheep’s teat, which archaeologists determined to be a baby bottle based on the milk traces preserved inside [see image 3] (Mallory and Mair 2000). His blonde hair was covered by a blue wool cap and blue stones covered his eyes, which Barber suggests may reveal their true color (1999). Nearby was a much more extravagant tomb containing Ur-David and three women [see figure 1] (Mallory and Mair 2000).
This larger tomb consisted of a small lower pit which then widened toward the mouth of the shaft. The bodies were deposited in the lower chamber, along with an assemblage of grave goods that consisted of a round-based clay jar, wooden combs, a milking pail, knitting needles, arrows and textiles. Above them were five layers of coverings: reed mats, a blanket, a brown robe, more reeds, animal skins, and finally a layer of twigs and timber beams (Mallory and Mair 2000) [see figure 2].

Ur-David had light brown, gray streaked hair and a trimmed beard, indicating that a kept beard may have been part of the society’s male grooming expectations [see image 4] (Mallory and Mair 2000). It is important to note that in Europe at this time males graves often contain bronze razors as part of a toiletry kit associated with an emerging warrior aristocracy, another piece of evidence indicating that cultural diffusion spread west to east through the Tarim Basin (Treherne 1995). Ur-David wore his hair in two
braids down the front of his chest. His jaw was closed tightly at the time of burial with a woolen strap that passed under his chin and over his head, but the flexible nature of the textile resulted in the common mummy gape. His face, like another mummy previously mentioned, was decorated with ochre designs. Yellow spirals were painted at each temple and have been interpreted by archaeologists as having a range of meanings, from sun bursts representing solar worship to the ram horns often represented in steppe art (Mallory and Mair 2000).

Of the three women accompanying Ur-David in the grave, only one was equally well preserved. She was approximately 55 years old and, unlike her male companion, had four braids, two of which were donated by another woman. Her face was decorated with a white stripe between her eyes and spirals on her eyelids and on either side of her nose (Mallory and Mair 2000).

More recently, in 1989, another tomb was excavated at Zaghunluq, a tomb that led archaeologist He Dexiu to claim that some of the Tarim mummies reflect human sacrifice. The tomb contained an adult female who was separated into several pieces (Mallory and Mair 2000). She had “salt-and-pepper” hair braided into two sections, and painted black brows (Mallory and Mair 2000:193). She had moon shaped tattoos on her eyelids and oval tattoos on her forehead, as well as tattooing on her back and left wrist (Mallory and Mair 2000).

To He, the most disturbing part of the tomb was the manner of burial of the one-year-old child dubbed the Scream Baby. He was deposited, according to He, upside down
with his head protruding into the chamber where the primary mummy lay. Though his mouth had been shut with a woolen strap, it appears to have slipped, giving him the typical mummy gape. That, coupled with the dried remains of tears and mucus on his face, is what prompted Dexiu to claim that the baby had been a live sacrifice interred in honor of the dead woman. Mallory and Mair point out that it is more likely the tears can be attributed to whatever ailment caused his early death (2000). Textile analysis of the baby’s burial suggests that it was related to the adults buried in the larger grave with Ur-David (Barber 1999).

Another mummy interred with the primary woman, who He uses as evidence for the claim of sacrifice, is a 20-25 year old woman whose eyes had been gouged out. Her arms and legs were also missing. Mallory and Mair point out that, rather than sacrifice, the woman may just have been moved to the tomb as a secondary location because her limb joints showed no evidence of butchery (2000). It is documented that in later periods of Chinese history desecrating an enemy’s ancestors was a frequent practice, so perhaps this is evidence of later East Asian migration into the region (Mallory and Mair 2000). The well preserved ancestors in the Tarim Basin would have provided good sport for this practice, which could explain the woman’s gouged eyes.

Subeshi

On the heels of the Zaghunluq cemetery came the mummies of Subeshi who, even in the mummy world, are quite extraordinary. Dating to 500-400 BCE, the ‘Hero of Subeshi’ and three women popularly identified as priestesses add an interesting twist to
the archaeological knowledge of Tarim culture. The man, who would have stood at about 1.65 meters tall, has been identified as a warrior based not only on his physical appearance, but also his grave assemblage. He was a “tough looking” individual with brown hair and a felt helmet (Mallory and Mair 2000:196). He seems to lend evidence to the claim mentioned earlier that the best preserved mummies were buried in the winter, as he is clothed in a thick coat made from a sheepskin, wearing the wool turned inward, and leather leggings. His grave goods consisted of a reflex bow, leather case, and a variety of wood, bone, and bronze and iron tipped arrows, an assortment that archaeologists attribute to the need to take down a variety of different prey (Mallory and Mair 2000).

The priestesses, or witches as they are known to Western society, were named as such by their enormous pointed hats. One of the women’s hats was double peaked, which local archaeologists speculated meant that she had two husbands. Another woman’s hat was so tall that rather than being buried with it on her head, it was placed beside her in the grave (Mallory and Mair 2000).

Accompanying this eclectic assortment of Subeshi characters is a male mummy who appears to have undergone some sort of cardiac surgery. Though his body was partially destroyed by a bulldozer, his chest remained intact, exhibiting three neat, horizontal incisions, stitched together with horsehair. His surgery was apparently unsuccessful as the wounds did not have time to heal before his death. He had bags of a brown substance thought to be red pigment and a crushed plant that was probably ephedra, meaning that he was being treated with medicine, a medicine which previous mummies prove these people used extensively (Mallory and Mair 2000).
The big picture

When considered on an individual basis, the mummies mentioned here may seem like a mishmash of time periods, archaeological sites, and cultural practices. Indeed, it is a strange assortment, from the lice infested Beauty of Kroran to the Hero of Subeshi and his priestess cohorts. What they have in common can be seen better by stepping back from the individual mummies, and looking at a map [see figure 3]. These are just a small sample of over a thousand total mummies that have been exhumed from the Tarim Basin (Wang 1999). But they are some of the best, most intact examples of Caucasoid mummies found in the region. And it is this curious Caucasian appearance which we are most interested in. The quote provided earlier, describing Victor Mair’s first encounter with the mummies in the Urumchi Museum, provides a strong description of the emotional response these ‘white’ mummies are evoking in their audience. Victor Mair saw the spitting image of his own brother when he first came face-to-face with Cherchen Man. Mair is spearheading an international effort to determine the origin of this mysterious population. And as striking

Figure 3. Map showing the distribution of Tarim mummies around the Taklamakan Desert. The settlements follow the edge of the desert, where the oases are located and agriculture would have been a sustainable lifestyle (Mallory and Mair 2000:179).
as it may be, the physical appearance of the mummies is only the beginning of the evidence that links the ancient population to Bronze Age Europe.

One source of evidence suggesting that cultural practices of the Tarim Basin were derived from the west is the diet of the ancient mummies versus that of their neighbors to the east. The major agricultural product of the Tarim Basin was wheat, whereas eastern China subsisted on millet in the north, and later rice, which was first domesticated in the south. Wheat was domesticated in the southwest, and therefore would have been introduced to central China from the west (Mair 2000). Evidence of goat, sheep, and cattle husbandry is also present in the ancient Tarim cemeteries, which contrasts with traditions to the east, where pigs were the “mainstay of the Chinese farm and menu” (Mair 2000:134). Goat and sheep would also have been introduced from the southwest.

Another line of evidence supporting a western origin of the mummies are the beautifully preserved textiles they were buried with. According to Elizabeth Barber, the prehistoric textile expert Mair enlisted, the cloth garments from the Tarim Basin sites were remarkably similar to those of the Bronze Age salt mines of Hallstatt and Hallein in Austria. “The Austrian plaid twills had been woven by ancestors of the Celts,” an Indo-European group linked

\[\text{Figure 4. Possible route of weaving technology transmission out of Austria (Barber 1999:135).}\]
linguistically to the Tocharians, a people who lived along the Silk Roads around the sixth century AD (Barber 1999:21; Wood 1995). Mair has postulated that the Tarim populations may have been the ancestors of the Tocharians, more closely connecting the ancient Tarim populations to Bronze Age Europe (Mair 2000). Barber makes the case that the weaving technology could have been transmitted east by the Gauls, who marauded their way east and west across Europe, accounting for the plaid twill design occurring in both Scotland and Xinjiang [see figure 4]. Fabric is impossible to preserve for such an extensive period of time without perfect conditions – such as the desiccated graves in Xinjiang and the mineral encased salt mines of Austria – so it is not possible to trace the route of the weaving technology based on physical evidence (Barber 1999).

Skeletal analysis of the mummies also lends clues to the origin debate. Chinese archaeologist Han Kangxin analyzed the craniometrics of 274 skulls from nine of the ancient Tarim cemeteries in an attempt to uncover the geographic origins of the populations [see figure 5]. He found that the earliest cemeteries had Eastern Mediterranean physical characteristics, while western racial features such as shortened and high cranial vaults, emerged several
centuries later. Overall the craniometric analysis illustrated that the ancient populations were culturally mixed, but largely lacking East Asian characteristics (Han 1994).

The analysis of the physical remains mirrors the results of genetic testing conducted on the central Asian populations. According to Mair, analysis of modern and ancient DNA tell the same story. The Uyghurs, Kazaks and other peoples of Central Asia are all mixed Caucasian and East Asian (Wong 2008). Based on current scholarship, the earliest populations of the Tarim Basin were Caucasoid, like the Beauty of Loulan. Later, about 3,000 years ago, East Asian populations began to migrate into the eastern edge of the Tarim Basin. Finally, around the year 842, the Uyghurs moved into the region after the collapse of the Orkon Uyghur Kingdom in Mongolia (Wong 2008).

By combining all of the different forms of evidence surrounding the Tarim mummies, an indistinct image of the ancient Xinjiang population begins to emerge. Cultural and forensic differences between the various mummy communities indicate that the region was most likely settled by multiple, separate incursions into the Tarim Basin. The Loulan community, represented by the Qawrighul cemetery, was the earliest migration, probably by an Iranian or Indo-Iranian group moving west along the southern Tarim oases. The later Hami population has stronger evidentiary ties to the Tocharians, who migrated into the region around 1200 BCE as herders travelling over the Tian Shan from the northern grasslands (Barber 1999).

What is clear from the bioarchaeological analysis of the Tarim mummies is that there is, as of yet, no simple definitive answer to the question of these ancient people’s ancestry. Both the ancient and modern Tarim Basin were cultural melting pots, and while evidence demonstrates that the earliest settlements were of Caucasian origin, it is unclear
exactly how the region was settled. Current scholarship does seem to conclude that the modern day Uyghurs are not direct descendants of the Beauty of Loulan. While the scientific and archaeological evidence does not conclude that the mummies are ancestors to the Uyghurs, it does support that the East Asians were relatively late-comers to the Xinjiang region. The historical narrative that the Uyghurs have a greater historical precedence than the central Chinese government to Xinjiang is a cornerstone to their ethnonationalist movement.
III: Lie to me – Uyghur nationalism and historical narrative

Over the past decade, episodes of ethnic unrest in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have garnered attention from the international community. In 2009, riots sparked by the accusation that Uyghur immigrant had raped Han girls killed 185 individuals and injured over 1000 (Clarke 2011).

The Uyghurs have struggled against cultural oppression and political domination by eastern China since the end of the Dynastic period. Now, enraged that the People’s Republic of China operates a seemingly imperialist policy in what should be a politically autonomous region, Uyghur intellectuals are initiating an ethnonational movement. Seeing the precedent for independence set by their neighbors, such as Kazakhstan, Uyghur separatists are calling for the formation of an independent Uyghur nation.

As China attempts to control the Tarim Basin’s dissatisfied minority population, the ancient mummies have become “protagonists in a very contemporary political dispute over who should control the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” (Wong 2008:1). The Beauty of Loulan has become the symbolic figurehead of this separatist agenda. The mummies of the Tarim Basin have become an integral part of the Uyghur separatist movement, empowering them to seek independence based on the claim that the Caucasoidal mummies prove Xinjiang was the ancestral homeland of a Turkic, not Chinese, people.

Chinese historian Ji Xianlin responded to the mummy’s entanglement with the country’s geopolitics by saying “within China a small group of ethnic separatists have
taken advantage of this opportunity to stir up trouble and are acting like buffoons. Some of them have even styled themselves the descendents of these ancient ‘white people’ with the aim of dividing the motherland. But these perverse acts will not succeed” (Wong 2008:4).

While Ji is supported by many scholars, including Mair, who agree that the Uyghurs are not direct descendants of the Tarim mummies or the Beauty of Loulan, he is premature in denouncing the success of the movement’s efforts. While the facts do not necessarily support the claim that they are the ancestors of modern-day Uyghurs, the evidence provided by the mummies “offers a far more nuanced history of settlement than the official Chinese version,” lending support to the claims made by Uyghur separatists that China does not have an indisputable claim to the region (Wong 2008:1).

**Xinjiang and its Uyghurs**

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang), or Eastern Turkistan or Uyghurstan as many Uyghur nationalist prefer to call it, is the largest political territory in China. Its 1.66 million square kilometers are divided into three major subregions: The Zhungarian Basin to the north, the Tarim Basin to the south, and the Turpan Depression to the east [see figure 6]. Between the two basins rise the Tian Shan mountain range, which cuts east across the territory (Rudelson 1997). The Tian Shan are one of five mountain ranges in Xinjiang (Anonymous 1989).
Although it occupies one-sixth of China’s total area, Xinjiang houses merely one percent of the country’s staggering 1.3 billion overall population (Bovingdon 2010). Historically, the region’s primary residents have been the Uyghurs. The Uyghurs, a Sunni Muslim, Turkic-speaking people, are one of China’s 56 ethnic groups, and one of 13 state-recognized ethnic groups currently residing in the region (Rudelson 1997). In the mid-twentieth century Uyghurs comprised seventy-five percent of Xinjiang’s total population of over four million residents. The Han, China’s dominant ethnic group, had a regional population of only 200,000 (Bovingdon 2010). State-directed Han immigration into Xinjiang, beginning in 1950, has buoyed the population to nearly equivalent that of the Uyghurs. In 2007 there were 8.2 million Han Chinese living in Xinjiang, and 9.65 million Uyghurs.
(Bovingdon 2010). If this trend continues, Uyghurs could soon be a minority in their own region [see figure 7].

The Tarim Basin is a formidable aspect of Xinjiang’s geography, stretching 966 kilometers across the region from east to west, and 402 kilometers north to south. This southern portion of Xinjiang, which also contains the Taklamakan Desert, is an extremely arid environment. It is one of the most landlocked areas of the world, and as such has a very dramatic temperature range. The region also has a wide range of altitude, from the basins to the surrounding mountain ranges. The lowest area of the Tarim Basin is 161 meters below sea level. The oases that host the Tarim Basin’s population are irrigated by snow and glacial melt from the Tian Shan, Pamir, Karakoram, Kunlun mountain ranges that surround this deep depression, making them the center of life in the arid environment. In contrast, the oases in northern Xinjiang are located in a steppe, not desert, environment (Rudelson 1997).

Eighty percent of Xinjiang’s Uyghurs are concentrated in the oases to the south, which surround the Tarim Basin (Bovingdon 2010). Alternately known as Alta-shahar (the six cities) - Korla, Kucha, Aksu, Kashgar, Tashkorgan and Khotan - were the major historical oases on the western edge of the basin [see figure 1]. This part of Xinjiang has also been called Huijiang, meaning ‘Muslim Territories’ (Rudelson 1997).

The Uyghur people are comprised of seven ethnographic groups, each with their own distinct cultural flavors. Much of this ethnographic distinction is a result of cross-border influences [see figure 8] (Rudelson 1997:24). The Dolans, who live primarily near Kashgar, practice the social custom of walking barefoot. Because of this, other Uyghur groups view them as being either poor, primitive, or both, a perception which is entirely

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4 Term coined by Soviet ethnologists, meaning the subgroup of an ethnic group (Rudelson 1997: 24).
untrue. The Lopliks, another subgroup, live in fishing communities near LopNur. These two groups, above all others, are considered by the Uyghurs to be the most separate from the singular Uyghur entity (Rudelson 1997).

The Abdals are an itinerant group who practice Alevi or Shia-influenced orthodox Islam. This group is customarily poor, and the people beg for alms. Because of this, other Uyghur groups often refer to the poor in general as ‘Abdals’. The Uyghur Abdals are frequently called upon to perform circumcisions (Rudelson 1997).

The Keriyaliks occupy the southern rim of the basin, east of Khotan. Because if their geographic location, this group has been largely influenced by northern Indian culture. They are described as appearing the most Caucasian of the Uyghur subgroups. The Keriyalik women wear a unique white headscarf with teacup-sized hats, a practice attributed to their Indian influence (Rudelson 1997).
The Kashgarliks, who have been primarily influenced by western Islamic peoples, have been instrumental in making Kashgar the Mecca of Xinjiang. They are devout Muslims (Rudelson 1997).

The eastern Uyghurs, who reside mainly in the oases of Turpan and Hami, are said to be the most closely related to the original Uyghur Empire of the eighth and ninth centuries. Because they have historically maintained close ties to China, and have the most Chinese physical features, this group is considered by other Uyghurs to be the least ‘Uyghur’ (Rudelson 1997).

The final subgroup, known as the Taranchis or Ili, originated in the Tarim Basin but migrated north to the Ili oases after the Qing Dynasty expelled the Zhungar Mongols from the Zhungarian Basin in 1759. Until the national *minzu*\(^5\) survey in 1949 this group was considered separate ethnic group (Rudelson 1997).

The differences in culture between these ethnographic groups seem as though they would make the singular category of ‘Uyghur’ problematic. Justin Rudelson supports the idea that the Uyghur population is in reality highly fragmented, a result of the development of individual oases communities which were largely cut-off from one and other before the modern Chinese government invested in the region’s infrastructure (Rudelson 1997). However, the notion of a singular ‘Uygur’ community does exist. Stevan Harrell states that traits like language and history, what he calls ethnic markers, are the foundation of ethnic identity (Harrell 2001). All Uyghur ethnographic groups have in common their Turkic language, Muslim religion, and the historical knowledge that Xinjiang is their ancestral homeland. With this basis for their shared identity the

\[^5\text{*Minzu* roughly translates to ethnicity or minority. The Chinese government’s use of *minzu* will be explored later in the section.}\]
population is becoming more strongly unified, especially vis-a-vis its common enemy: the Han dominated Chinese government (Rudelson 1997).

Xinjiang is a vital resource area for China [see figure 9]. The region possesses 40 percent of China’s coal reserves, one-third of the country’s natural gas and proven oil reserves, as well as heavy deposits of gold, salt, uranium, and other economically valuable materials (Bovingdon 2010; Teague 2009). China has been a net oil importer since 1993, which means that any domestic reserves, and the region that possesses them, are extremely valuable (Bovingdon 2010). As China is a major fuel importer, Xinjiang is seen as a “corridor for shipping energy resources”, where an oil pipeline and natural gas line connecting Central Asia and Siberia with the “energy hungry” Chinese coast have

![Figure 9. Economic resource map of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Teague 2009:42-43).](image)
already been established (Bovingdon 2010:11).

In addition to natural deposits, Xinjiang is a valuable territory for several other reasons. The region’s climate is well suited to cotton growing, and the Chinese Communist Party plans to convert the area to the county’s “cotton basket”, regardless of the proven environmental degradation caused by the industry (Bovingdon 2010:11). The government also sees the region as a potential solution to the well-known overcrowding issues of China’s urban cities. Xinjiang has already been used to resettle those evicted as a result of the Three Gorges Dam project (Bovingdon 2010).

In the past Xinjiang has also proven valuable as a territorial buffer from previous Sino-Soviet tensions, given its strategic geographic location (Bovingdon 2010). The region shares international borders with Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Xinjiang shares internal borders with three of China’s other land holdings, Qinghai and Gansu provinces, as well as the Tibet Autonomous Region (Bovingdon 2010). Given the value of Xinjiang, for a variety of reasons, it is no wonder that the Chinese government refuses to acknowledge the Uyghurs’ demand for independence.

In addition to Han immigration, one tactic the central Chinese government has used to maintain control of this vital, resource-rich region is to play off the West’s potent post-9/11 fears. The September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States and subsequent international attacks initiated a reprioritization of international politics, with a focus on terrorism over all other issues, including ethnic conflict. Taking advantage of this shift, states like China “…were able to portray insurgents as terrorists undeserving of any international support and state authorities benefited from the reinterpretation of some
violent conflicts that had previously been seen in ethnic terms as problems of terrorism”
(Guelke 2010:5). China’s move to influence international perceptions of Xinjiang is what
Gardner Bovingdon refers to as representational politics (Bovingdon 2010:7).

Prior to the September 11, 2001, attacks, Chinese officials worked to downplay
the unrest in Xinjiang as “the work of ‘ruffians’ in a Uyghur population that was
otherwise blissful. In early September 2001, Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Wang
Lequan announced that ‘society is stable, and people are living and working in peace and
contentment” (Teague 2009:47). However, within a month of the terrorist attacks in the
United States, the Chinese government had dramatically changed their party line, issuing
a report blaming Xinjiang’s unrest on Osama bin Laden, and the Eastern Turkistan
Islamic Movement was listed as a terrorist organization by the United States. According
to Professor James Millward of Georgetown University, “It’s an effective strategy
because in America we see Muslims somewhere who are unhappy and maybe even
violent, and we assume it’s because of religious reasons” (Teague 2009:47). However, in
most cases Uyghur resistance to China’s rule is driven by nationalism, not Islamism
(Bovingdon 2010).

There’s no place like home: ethnonationalism and the ethnic homeland

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was annexed first by the Qing Dynasty and
again by the modern Chinese nation in 1955. It is this annexation that lies at the center of
the political dispute between China and the Xinjiang Uyghurs. China has frequently
spouted the party line that “Xinjiang has been an integral part of Chinese national
territory ‘since ancient times’” (Bovingdon 2010:3). In stark contrast, the Uyghurs
believe that they, and their land, are “part of a distinct Uyghur nation, with its own rightful homeland, history, culture, and language” (Bovingdon 2010:3). Since the close of World War II, ethnic groups throughout Eurasia and Africa have been making claims for the dissolution of colonial empires and formation of individual ethnic states (Connor 1994:5). In order to understand these claims, and that of the Uyghurs, one must deconstruct the modern understanding of the nation and analyze the role of ethnonationalism in nation-building.

The definition of ‘nation’ has evolved and transformed throughout history, especially with the recognition of rising ethnic national movements. Even now scholars of nationalism and national identity, such as Benedict Anderson, Walker Connor, and Anthony Smith, are working to resolve these definitions.

In 1913 Joseph Stalin defined a nation as “a historically evolved, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (Connor 1994:73). While some aspects of Stalin’s definition, such as the notion of a common territory, the modern definition is much more streamlined, focusing on two key points: a common descent and ancestral homeland.

Anthony Smith defines the nation as “a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historic memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (Smith 1991:14). Smith’s ‘ethnic’ model of national identity emphasizes common descent, in that the nation one identifies with is the nation of birth, the individual’s native culture.

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6 The ethnic model rests in juxtaposition to the ‘Western’ model which, according to Anthony Smith, is “a predominately spatial or territorial conception” in which the people and the land must “belong to each
Walker Connor uses the terms nationalism and ethnonationalism as interchangeable synonyms, asserting that the ‘nation,’ in the purest sense, is a group of people who believe that they are ancestrally related.

The nation is defined in juxtaposition to the ‘state’, which is a political, not cultural or hereditary, entity. Nationalism (and ethnonationalism) thus describes an identification with, and loyalty to, the perceived ancestral nation, not one’s political country (Connor 1994:xi). Connor claims that “ethnic nationalism poses the most serious threat to political stability in a host of states” (Connor 1994:71). China is one of these states.

Connor recognizes that there are several different manifestations of a nation in relation to the state [see figure 10]. China can be described as a multinational, multihomeland state, meaning that there are many separate ethnic groups within the state which not only fit the description of a nation, but also claim an ancestral homeland within the political boundaries of the state. Connor would classify the Uyghurs as a potential nation (Connor 1994).

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other” (Smith 1991:9). In the Western model new communities could be incorporated into the nation, though it could take several generations before the group was admitted into the historic culture (Smith 1991). This contrasts with the ethnic model, where one is placed in a nation by birth, and thus cannot sever ties in favor of membership in a different nation (Smith 1991).

Connor also cites Zimbabwe as one of his examples (Connor 1994:71). A comparative analysis of ethnic nationalism in Zimbabwe and Xinjiang will occur later in the paper.

Connor (1994) defines an offshoot nation as a segment of a nation which is geographically cutoff from the parent nation long enough to develop a separate consciousness. At first glance this sounds like a definition the Uyghur would fall under, especially since Rudelson (1997) comments on how the geographic challenges of transportation from China proper to Xinjiang has fostered the development of international rather than intranational relationships in this borderland region. However, Connor goes even further into defining the offshoot nation, saying “Members retain an awareness that they derive from the parent stock, but they believe that the characteristics they have in common are less significant than those that make them unique” (Connor 1994:80). Since the Uyghurs adamantly refute having ever been a part of the Chinese
Perhaps the most important distinction between the past definition and those currently favored is that modern scholars have recognized that the narrative truth of a nation is irrelevant. It does not matter whether or not the common ancestry and territorial homeland claimed by the group is historically accurate. Essentially what matters is what the people, not historians, believe. This is true in Xinjiang, as an analysis of the region’s history will show.

Many Uyghur intellectuals denounce China’s governing of Xinjiang as a thinly veiled imperialist policy maintained by military force, a political hold-over from dynastic rule in the region (Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004). Since China’s earliest dynasties the country has expanded across Asia, acquiring new lands and new peoples. According to Morris Rossabi, “…as the Han (206 BCE-CE 220), Tang (618-907), and other great dynasties gained power, the official ideology of a culturally superior China, surrounded by less sophisticated peoples, developed” (Rossabi 2004:3). China’s last dynasty, the Manchu Qing, who ruled from 1644 until the emperor was forced to abdicate in 1911, initiated a firm policy of territorial expansion, “toward domination of areas populated by non-Han peoples” (Rossabi 2004:5). Under this imperialist policy the Qing armies turned their eye to the west, unlike their predecessors who believed that western domination came at too high a cost. By the year 1691 the Eastern Mongols had been dominated and made vassals of the Manchus, and five years later the Zhungar had also been defeated (Rossabi 2004). The Zhungar, or Western Mongols, gave their name to the Zhungarian Basin in present-day northern Xinjiang. This northern section was the area the Qing

nation other than as a colonized subject, they have no such association with the ‘parent stock’ described by Connor (1994). Thus the designation of ‘potential nation’ is the most accurate classification of the Uyghur people.
Chinese originally referred to as Xinjiang, the ‘New Territories’, after conquering both the eastern and western Mongol groups (Rudelson 1997).

Some of these Western Mongols fled south to Tibet, where in 1720 the Qing armies again took control. In 1757 the Qing, in an attempt to bring to heel the western “barbarians” once and for all, annexed the southern portion of Xinjiang as well. In the eyes of the Qing, the term ‘barbarian’ encompassed all of the western peoples including Mongols and Uyghurs, a very xenophobic oversimplification. With this total military domination the whole region became known as ‘Xinjiang’ (Rossabi 2004:5; Rudelson 1997).

This is the point in the story when one reaches the bone of contention between the two national histories, that of the Uyghurs and of the Chinese state. While China claims that Xinjiang has been a part of the state ‘since ancient times’, the Uyghur historical narrative holds that they were not joined with the Chinese until this eighteenth century annexation (Bovingdon 2010:3).

The Uyghurs assert that their historical precedence for the land goes back far beyond China’s, as they settled the Tarim Basin long before the armies of the Manchu Qing began marching west. Uyghur intellectuals have constructed a mythological narrative in which the Uyghurs are said to have lived in the Tarim Basin as far back as 8,000 years ago, before the region was a desert. According to this history, the Uyghurs migrated north into the steppe when the region’s climate began to shift to a more arid

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9 Max Weber asserts that “it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity” (Weber 1978:389). Given that common ethnicity and common descent are entwined in ethnonationalist theory, the same can be said of nation-building mythological narratives. Smith says that separatists are predominately the educated, while Connor argues that nationalist movements are mass social mobilizations and the role of the intelligenzia should not be over-emphasized (Connor 1994; Smith 1991). Given this information, I would argue that Uyghur intellectuals, who are most politically active, construct the national narratives, while the majority of Uyghurs give the movement social power through belief, which is an act of everyday resistance.
The international scholar community supports a historical account of Central Asia that has the Uyghurs migrating from the Mongolia steppe into the Tarim Basin after the collapse of the Orkon Uyghur Kingdom in 842 (Wong 2008). The ethnic historical narrative aligns with the scholarly history on this point (Rudelson 1997). While some of the more ancient aspects of their historical narrative are contested\textsuperscript{10}, the Uyghurs were without a doubt living in Xinjiang before the Qing conquest.

The Uyghur’s claim to the Xinjiang territory is a defining trait. Their ability to construct a narrative that identifies an ancestral homeland is part of what distinguishes the potential nation from simply an ethnic group. According to Smith, “Nations have deep roots… Nationalism is about ‘land’, …belonging where forefathers lived and where history demarcates a ‘homeland’” (Smith 1991:70). Ernest Gellner wrote that “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist”\textsuperscript{11} (Gellner 1965:168). The Uyghur narrative describing their native claim to the Xinjiang region is a nation-building exercise, which legitimates their rights to a separate ethnic nation, according to the modern understanding of ethnonationalism.

Laying claim to an ancestral homeland is an integral part of an ethnonational separatist movement. Connor states “members of a homeland people believe they possess a primary and exclusive title to the homeland,” which helps to explain why autonomous regions in China, which represent national homelands, are the regions with the most

\textsuperscript{10} There is no archaeological or scientific evidence that the modern day Uyghurs resided in the Tarim Basin prior to the 842 collapse of the Uyghur Empire. See Part I discussion of Uyghur hereditary relationship with ancient Tarim Basin peoples.

active separatist communities (Connor 1994:78). “Those living within the homeland manifest greater animosity toward other groups and greater resistance to acculturation and assimilation. But the most consequential aspect of homeland psychology has been the hostility engendered by an intrusion of ‘the native land’ by nonnatives” (Connor 1994:78). Uygur resistance toward assimilation with the greater Chinese state is a phenomenon much remarked on (Bovingdon 2010; Rudelson 1997). This resistance has led to separatist rebellions dating back to Dynastic China.

After acquiring Xinjiang, the Qing “sought to moderate its hard-line policy” to avoid stirring up non-Han resistance (Rossabi 2004:5). The Qing policy was intended to protect the native non-Hans from economic discrimination, restrictions on religious practice, and exploitation by Han entrepreneurs. “The Qing court apparently assumed that the native peoples would gradually be absorbed into China – quite simply, they would come to be transformed once they recognized the superiority of the hybrid Chinese-Manchu civilization” (Rossabi 2004:5). However, the administrative officials willing to leave the heart of the empire for what they saw as the culturally inferior borderlands “were neither the most competent nor the most honest, undermining the court policy of evenhandedness toward the newly subjugated populations” (Rossabi 2004:5). The failure of the Qing administration to assimilate and protect the Uyghurs from religious persecution and economic exploitation led to widespread regional turbulence, with revolts starting as early as 1781 (Rossabi 2004).

The uprisings came to a head in 1862 with a massive rebellion against the Qing Dynasty. The revolt, centered in Kashgar, which was historically one of the most politically unstable oases, expelled the Chinese in favor of a newly established,
independent Kashgar Emirate. This rebellion, led by Yaqub Beg who ruled 1864-1877, was “perhaps the greatest Turkic threat ever to Chinese leadership,” according to Rudelson (1997:27). This period fostered a strong pan-Turkic sentiment. The Ottoman flag flew over Kashgar from 1873 until 1877, and coins depicted the Ottoman sultans until the Qing regained control over the region after Yaqub Beg’s death (Rudelson 1997).

In 1911 the Qing Dynasty was overthrown, and the country dissolved into chaos as warlords, the Chinese Nationalist Party and the USSR all struggled for control of the country. Between this period and the emergence of the modern Chinese nation, governed by the Chinese Communist Party, the Uyghurs staged two major rebellions, establishing short-lived but fully independent Uyghur political nations (Rudelson 1997).

In 1931 one of the largest Uyghur rebellions broke out against Nationalist China in the oasis region of Khotan. Khotan occupied an important location as it was along the southern branch of the Silk Roads and linked to South Asia and Tibet. The rebellion touched off in Hami and spread south, undermining Chinese control of Xinjiang to the point of near-collapse. The Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkestan took power, with its capital in Khotan. The separatist government only held power for one year, from 1933 to 1934, during which time Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and Britain all refused to recognize the republic (Rudelson 1997).

A later revolt in the oasis of Ili posed the greatest Turkic political threat to China within living memory. The rebellion, supported by the Soviet Union, successfully established the Eastern Turkestan Republic, which remained intact and governed a majority of the region from 1944 to 1949. “It was the most significant indigenous independence movement in this century. The leaders were sophisticated and highly
intellectual, wrapping themselves in the cloak of democracy and antifacism” (Rudelson 1997:29). The separatists did not stop with the creation of the republic, but sought to unify all of the Central Asian Turks. They produced pamphlets such as this one, entitled “Why are we fighting”, which utilized pan-Turkic language:

“Who are we? Who and where are our near and far relations? Where are the burial grounds – so dear to us – of our beloved and renowned ancestors?

In answer to these questions, any man who seeks the truth and whose heart is right cannot fail to say that the root of our nation and soul is not in China, but in Central Asia, in Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and Tatarstan. Our native place is East Turkestan; we are the eastern branch and part of that race – bound to us by blood relationship – the other parts of which lie within the Soviet Union; we are the part that is fighting” [Rudelson 1997:30].

The East Turkestan Republic crumbled when its leaders were killed in a plane crash en route to a conference with the Chinese Communist Party, a crash which many Uyghurs believe to have been a conspiracy between Communist China and the Soviet Union12 (Rudelson 1997). Between 1949 and 1950 the People’s Liberation Army seized control of the region, and in 1955 it was reannexed as a part of the People’s Republic of China, becoming the modern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Rossabi 2004).

The Chinese superficially honored the ancestral claim of the Uyghurs to Xinjiang as it was incorporated into the state by classifying it as an autonomous region. However, Gardner Bovingdon argues, “though the Party claimed that the establishment of Xinjiang as a ‘Uyghur Autonomous Region’ gave Uyghurs unprecedented political sway in the territory they had historically occupied, in fact it minimized their political influence in a number of ways (Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004:117). During the Republic period (1911-

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12 The East Turkistan Republic was gaining power to the point of becoming a threat to not only the Chinese state, but also the Soviet Union, a state that had just relinquished Kazakhstan from its empire but still controlled some of the other Turkic populations, like Kirghiz, which the pan-Turkic literature was targeting (Rudelson 1997).
1949) the Uyghur claim of ancestral precedence was undermined by a policy statement which designated the Uyghurs as one of thirteen different ethnic groups, including Han Chinese, who had historically resided in the territory. The policy was a result of the loss of Chinese control in Xinjiang during the 1931 Khotan rebellion, which “led the Chinese government to begin a program of redefining the modern Uyghur identity so as to place this minority firmly under control” (Rudelson 1997:28).

The Communist state maintained this divisive structure, re-enforcing the policy with the results from a national survey of ethnic groups, referred to as minzu. The survey recognized 56 official minzu, including the Han ethnicity. The identification of state minzu was conducted in an effort to help the state preserve the diverse cultural and linguistic heritage of the greater Chinese nation, according to the Chinese Communist government, through a socialist system which recognized all ethnicities, putting the dominant Han group on equal ethnic footing with the lower-population minorities (Rossabi 2004). Communist leaders asserted that if all groups were viewed as equal by the state then hostility and ethnic divisions would cease to exist. However, Rossabi argues that “the major Chinese specialists on minorities continued to refer to the autonomous regions as ‘backward ethnic-minority areas’ and to assert that the Han would help them ‘accelerate development and achieve common prosperity,’” demonstrating that the Communist government, much like the Qing Dynasty before them, assumed that the ethnic minorities would be drawn to integrate into the ‘superior’ Han culture (Rossabi 2004:8). The government instituted Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution initiated “attacks against the minority people’s languages, heritage, and customs,” further
illustrating that the state’s end-goal was assimilate, not preserve, the country’s ethnic diversity (Rossabi 2004:9).

The publicized party line of the minzu survey and regional autonomy system is “dang jia zuo zhu”, meaning ‘masters of their own house’ (Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004:119). The opposite effect is true for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Since the minzu survey and preceding Nationalist government recognized 13 ethnic groups as having historically resided in Xinjiang, Communist administrators divided the region into ‘subautonomies’ that would “counterbalance the overwhelming political and demographic weight of the Uyghurs” (Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004:118). The political system allowed each ethnic group a regional prefecture and representative seat in the autonomous government [see figure 11] (Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004). This system ensured that, because of inherent cultural differences and historical inter-ethnic conflict, the entire regional government would never unify against China proper (Rudelson 1997; Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004). The Uyghurs control scattered regions that are isolated from each other by Kirghiz, Hui, Mongol and Kazakh prefectures (Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004).
A Taiwanese analyst remarked that “the leaders of the autonomous regions are essentially all deputed or appointed by the CCP authorities and have a firm grip on power. The system is called ‘self government’ (zizhi), but in reality it is ‘we are in charge’ (yi wo wei zhu)” (Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004:120).

It is clear that Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is not governed through autonomy, but rather heteronomy. Bovingdon asserts that

“officials have regarded the Uyghurs, as a group, to be politically untrustworthy and have therefore allotted very little power to them. The Party leadership…has reserved the decisive authority at virtually all levels for trusted Hans, who have been imported from posts in China proper. In administrative terms, this is a frankly colonial apparatus” [Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004:120].

Though this colonial system allows the Chinese government to maintain firm administrative control over the region, it is also problematic for the state in that it creates sympathy for Uyghur separatists, since the minority group does not actually enjoy the freedom China claims to have bestowed on them (Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004). Connor claims that “in all cases [of ethnonationalism] for which there are attitudinal data, members of ethnonational groups overwhelmingly reject the use of violence carried out in the name of the national group… However, a large percentage, including many who do not favor separatism, empathize with those engaged in violence and place the blame for violence upon others” (Connor 1994:82). The sympathetic backlash resulting from the faux autonomy has forced Chinese officials to rely on Han immigration and military force to suppress Uyghur dissidents (Bovingdon in Rossabi 2004:121).

China’s colonial dominance over Xinjiang is a primary point of contention for many Uyghurs, who do not necessarily advocate for complete separation from China or the formation of a new Turkic state, but do call for a true state of political autonomy: one
in which they are free from political and cultural domination by the Han majority\textsuperscript{13} (Rossabi 2004). “Ethnonational concerns, by their very nature, are more obsessed with a vision of freedom from domination by nonmembers than with a vision of freedom to conduct foreign relations with other states” (Connor 1994:83). According to Connor (1994), in most nations with an active separatist movement, the majority does not favor actual secession, but would settle instead for political reform resulting in greater autonomy. This is entirely true of the Uyghurs, most of whom are more concerned with the cultural oppression they experience daily than the political oppression which so enrages the intellectual and elites of the separatist movement (Rossabi 2004; Bovingdon 2010).

Uyghurs experience oppression in a variety of daily circumstances (Rossabi 2004:15). Religion, language, and cultural practices are being repressed by the government and Han immigration into the region. Xinjiang’s top economic and political opportunities are being awarded to the Han population, not the native minority (Rossabi 2004). “In a recent recruiting effort the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps reserved some 800 of its 840 civil job openings for Han workers” (Teague 2009:50). The corps was originally started in 1954 with the state-mandated immigration of 100,000 demobilized soldiers into Xinjiang (Teague 2009). One of the largest industries in the region is in energy, but the state owns energy companies and shows preference to Han job seekers. Some of the best jobs available are in the government, but employees have to

\textsuperscript{13} Susan McCarthy put forth the idea in her book \textit{Communist Multiculturalism} that many of China’s ethnic groups identify with both their own ethnic group and the larger Chinese nation, i.e. “I am half-Yi, half-Han. I am all Chinese” (McCarthy 2009:3). However, the Uyghurs view themselves as an entirely separate entity from the Chinese nation, and thus do not ascribe to this Communist multiculturalism model.
join the Communist Party, which would require Uyghurs to renounce their religion (Teague 2009).

Uyghur parents are frustrated by the gradual disappearance of Uygur language in Xinjiang schools, despite the state’s official bilingual policy. Some parents push their children to learn Mandarin Chinese because it is necessary to move ahead in the Han dominated country, but they mourn losing touch with the native tongue and identity as they attempt to assimilate (Teague 2009).

While the government has generally turned a blind eye to rural religious practices, the Chinese do monitor mosque activities and scrutinize mashraps\textsuperscript{14} (Teague 2009). In the past, the government has “sought to loosen the hold of religion on the rest of the population while simultaneously working to transform Uyghur Islam into a state-supporting institution” (Bovingdon 2010:15).

Multiple scholars and field reporters have recounted how freedom of speech has been repressed in Xinjiang because of the government’s harsh treatment of any forms of dissidents (Allen 1996; Rudelson 1997; Teague 2009). Additionally, one of the most recent and dramatic acts of cultural violence against the Uyghurs by the Chinese government is the demolition of Kashgar’s Old City, where many Uyghur families have lived for generations (Teague 2009). The destruction started in 2009 to make way for the expansion of the modern city. Now only a small representative section remains, mostly for the sake of tourists rather than the Uyghur residents (personal communication with Whitman professor Brian Dott, April 2012). It is examples of cultural oppression such as these that have enraged many Uyghurs. Through a nationalism movement, they seek to

\textsuperscript{14} Mashrap are traditional male Islamic religious meetings (Teague 2009).
diminish Han dominance in their homeland and attain autonomy, or even an independent nation.

Mother’s land: a narrative of Uyghur ancestry

Constructing a narrative that makes claim to an ethnic homeland is an essential component of ethnonationalism. The Uyghurs have been able to claim Xinjiang as their homeland on the basis of their historical settlement of the area, as well as by denouncing China’s presence in the region as imperialism. In addition to an ancestral homeland, a universal characteristic of modern definitions of the nation is the notion that a group must have a myth of common descent which ties them to their specified ancestral territory (Connor 1994; Smith 1991). In the past scholars of nationalism have resisted defining national groups by common ancestry because, in reality, many represent a fusion of multiple ancestral groups. However, Connor claims “it is not what is, but what people believe is that has behavioral consequences. A nation is a group of people characterized by a myth of common descent” (Connor 1994:75). “The historical accuracy of the myth is irrelevant” (Connor 1994:80).

While scholars may have ignored the ideal of a common ancestry, political leaders have recognized and utilized this aspect of nationalism as a means to unify and inspire populations (Connor 1994). In 1938 Mao Tse-tung described Chinese Communists as “part of the great Chinese nation, flesh of its flesh and blood of its blood” (Connor 1994:75). However, in cases such as China, where state and ethnonational loyalty come into conflict, loyalty to the state never gains precedence over the nation
(Connor 1994). The dominant or ruling ethnic group is constructing a mythological narrative to legitimate their administration, which inherently places it at odds with minority nations who have their own myth of unique ancestry (Smith 1991:41). According to Smith, the myth of common ancestry is central to ethnic identity (1991:2). Additionally, Connor notes that once this myth has been constructed a nation must practice endogamy in order to maintain the imagined ancestry\(^\text{15}\) (Connor 1994:75).

Given this ethnonationalist preoccupation with an ancestry of common descent, it is no stretch of the imagination to see why the Uyghurs have tied themselves to the Tarim mummies, and why the Chinese government has found this relationship so disconcerting. The oldest mummies exhumed from the Tarim Basin, such as the Beauty of Loulan, predate any written historical reference to settlement in Xinjiang. They are the earliest identifiable culture in the region, and they make it undeniably clear that East Asia was not the initial occupant. This is a powerful statement, given that it throws into sharp relief that China’s role in the region now is as essentially a colonial government presiding over a culturally repressed, ethnically distinct, potential nation. In light of the former Soviet Union’s liberation of its Turkic colonial subjects, this puts the People’s Republic of China in a precarious position. There is a regional precedence for the independence of ethnonations like Xinjiang’s Uygurs, but China cannot afford to relinquish the region’s territorial wealth.

\(^{15}\) While visiting Xinjiang on a field studies trip in spring 2009 I had the opportunity to discuss inter-ethnic marriages with a Uyghur man whose family hosted my group for lunch. He said that Uyghur youth are forbidden to marry Han Chinese, remarking that a father would prefer his son marry a complete outsider, such as me, rather than a Han girl.
Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) describes the importance of narratives to culture and imperialism, using as examples mainstream European novels such as the works of Jane Austen. He writes,

“narrative is… the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative” [Said 1993:xiii].

This perception of the narrative is a beautiful illustration of the relationship between the Uyghurs, China, and Xinjiang’s mummies. Although current scientific and scholarly theory does not support the Uyghur’s claim of an ancestral relationship to the mummies, their narrative of a 4,000 year prerogative to the Xinjiang region is no less powerful. Through their constructed history they are able to unite a traditionally fragmented peoples into a singular unified identity, in a sense claiming their own new culture apart from the imposed narratives of China and its *minzu*, of the Western world and its fear of global Islamic terrorism.

An alternate example to the Xinjiang mummies of the archaeological site of Great Zimbabwe, and the narrative of the Zimbabwe nation it inspired. Joost Fontein asserts that “the use of Great Zimbabwe has followed an almost standardized model for nationalism, that is oriented partly around a need to reach into the past for primordial legitimacy in the present” (2006:132). Like the Uyghurs, the Zimbabwe people were colonized subjects. They laid claim to Great Zimbabwe, and other similar sites, but the government officials denied their claim based on the perception that they were an inferior culture, they could not possibly be related to so great an ancient civilization. In an anti-colonial movement, the people of Zimbabwe used the archaeology of their region to
create a unified national unity, “binding together, along specifically racial lines, under the label ‘Zimbabwe’ the plethora of different ethnic groups and identities but most significantly the Shona and Ndebele, into one nation, with which, and for which to fight for liberation” (Fontein 2006:124). Technically, the Zimbabwe narrative constructed was not entirely accurate, as the Great Zimbabwe is attributed mostly to the Shona people, but the narrative encompasses all of the ethnic groups (Fontein 2006).

This is a perfect example of Said’s concept of the constructed narrative allowing a colonized people to claim their own history. It is also comparable to the case of the Uyghur’s; the Zimbabwe narrative was not archaeologically accurate. Its power came from the ability to unify a colonized, fractured group of ethnicities. The Uyghurs are a historically fragmented group, with each oases community having its own distinctive identity. The Xinjiang mummies have the capacity to unify this segmented population into a singular identity, regardless of the scientific truth of their origin, because the narrative constructed imagines the origin of a singular Uyghur people, giving rise to a unified modern, anti-colonial identity.

Tibet, Xinjiang’s neighbor to the south, is also engaged in a struggle for independence from China. Xinjiang has even been referred to as ‘the other Tibet’ (Teague 2009). However, the Tibetan population has received much more positive attention from the West than the Uyghurs. According to an article published in National Geographic Magazine, “The Western world knows of the struggle for freedom by Tibetans largely because the Dalai Lama presents a warm and charismatic embodiment of his people. The Uyghurs have remained obscure, in part, because they have no such
figure” (Teague 2009:55). After the September 11th attacks, much of the region’s publicity has been negative.

The Xinjiang mummies have the potential to change this, giving the separatist Uyghurs a charismatic symbol for their movement and transitioning the Western world’s view of them from a negative Islamic stereotype to a more positive perception. When the mummies were rediscovered by Mair, they made quite the splash into the Western arena. First Discovery, then Archaeology and National Geographic all featured the mysterious mummies on their magazine’s front cover. PBS soon followed with special, highlighting how China was struggling to keep the archaeology of these Caucasian cultures under wraps. Newspapers like LA Times all featured stories on the mummies, and none were complete without a thorough and romanticized description of how mesmerized Mair was when he first came face-to-face with them in the Urumchi museum, or how he instantly identified with Ur-David (Demick 2010). These mummies have a lot of personality, even in death.

By constructing a mythological ancestry in which they are the descendents of the Tarim mummies, the Uyghurs capitalize on this personality. The Beauty of Loulan has become a symbol of the ethnonational movement, as she represents both the myth of common descent unifying all Uyghurs, but also the historical precedence over the Xinjiang territory that the Uyghur’s constructed historical narrative claims. As the ‘mother of the nation’, her face adorns nationalist posters and she even has a pop song written about her [see image 5] (Allen 1996).
The Beauty of Loulan also has the potential to soften the negative perception China has created of the Uyghurs in the western world. If the Uyghurs are seen rallying around a mummy that many Caucasian Westerners, like Mair, identify with, rather than being viewed as supporting terrorist insurgents, the Uyghurs could begin to develop a sympathetic following. Tibet has gained a huge international activist group, including celebrities, which advocates for its freedom and fair treatment by China. With enough positive international attention, the Uyghurs may very well gain a fan base of their own. Foreign assistance could help Xinjiang become sovereign state, which, according to Bovingdon, they may not be able to do on their own (Bovingdon 2010:3).

Uyghurs are employing the archaeology of their homeland in order to negotiate their political world, and they have been highly successful given that in reality they have no scientific validity to their claim. It is fascinating how much political power the mummies hold, even though there is evidence disproving that the Uyghurs and mummies are related. Last February the University of Pennsylvania Museum was slated to host the mummies in an exhibit entitled The Secrets of the Silk Roads. At the last minute, Chinese government officials refused to allow the artifacts, including several mummies, to be displayed. For nine days the exhibit was up in the air, as Chinese and US government officials negotiated the display of the loaned artifacts (Cuno 2011). The exhibit was eventually reinstated, but the simple fact that the negotiations took place between the Chinese government and US diplomats, rather than museum curators, illustrates that the factors involved in displaying the mummies were of a highly political nature. Because the mummies have been so inextricably linked to Uyghur nationalism, something as
seemingly simple as a museum display has large scale political ramifications for the Chinese.

According to Smith, “a sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining a locating individual selves in the world… It is through a shared, unique culture that we are enabled to know ‘who we are’ in the contemporary world. By rediscovering that culture we ‘rediscover’ ourselves, the ‘authentic self’…This process of self-definition and location is in many ways the key to national identity” (Smith 1991:17). The mummies exhumed from Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region are unifying China’s Uyghur communities and inspiring them to define their ethnonation and claim an identity separate from those which China has constructed and imposed on them in the past. The mummies are empowering the minority to challenge China’s colonial domination over them in the international arena, by helping them to construct their own national narrative and gain positive international attention. The Tarim mummies are actively shaping the modern Uyghur identity by unifying them under a single ancestry, narrative, and political cause.
IV: Conclusion – From whence we came

Ethnonationalism and nation-building are hot topics in today’s post-colonial world. But it is not often that scholars are able to write about the process as it is initiated. The case study on Zimbabwe that was explored earlier is a perfect example of this. Joost Fontein’s analysis of the use of archaeology by the colonial subject to construct a national narrative is an excellent look back at how ethnic groups are able to negotiate for their political power (2006).

What is exciting about analyzing ethnonationalism in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is that it is so timely. The Uyghurs are just beginning to establish their newly constructed narrative. With this ethnic community nationalist scholars have the opportunity to watch the development of a modern ethnonational movement, instead of viewing it only as the past.

The mummies exhumed from Xinjiang’s Tarim Basin have attracted a lot of attention because of their mysterious ‘ethnicity’. Though scholarship in the area still has a long way to go, it is clear that the ancient Tarim communities originally migrated from the west.

This conclusion is problematic because it reveals that East Asia, and China proper with it, do not have much of a case for historical precedence over the area. This is made much more problematic by the fact that the Uyghur’s who currently reside in the region have long disputed China’s political control over them, a control that was achieved during the Dynastic period and firmly maintained through imperialist policy.
Many Uyghurs, like the Tarim mummies, appear more Caucasian than East Asian. The ancient and modern populations share the same high nose, blue eyes, and blonde hair. So it should come as no surprise that the Uyghurs have claimed the mummies as their ancestors. What is surprising is the power the ethnic group has gained through this association.

The Uyghurs have used the mummies to construct an ethnonational narrative that claims Xinjiang as their ancestral homeland and the mummies as proof of their ancestral continuity. As a symbol of these claims, the Uyghurs have adopted the oldest and best preserved mummy, the Beauty of Loulan, to represent the constructed singular ‘Uyghur identity’. The national myths are uniquely able to transcend cultural differences between the ethnographic groups and truly unify what has historically been a fragmented, oases-centered population.

The archaeological and scholarly investigation performed on the relationship between the Tarim mummies and modern populations has conclusively found that the Uyghurs are not direct descendents of the Beauty of Loulan, or any of the other mummies, but are a proverbial cultural melting pot, combining Mongoloid, Caucasian, East Asian, and other physical traits and DNA markers. Regardless of these conclusions, the mummies have become an essential aspect of the Uygur identity, and thus the ethnonational movement it supports.

The relationship between the mummies and the Uyghurs has caused Communist China visible political discomfort. Xinjiang is one of several autonomous regions and, like the Tibetan and Mongolian territories, is more difficult, and essential, to control because of its position as a borderland. The Uyghurs have had a few short-lived
independence movements throughout history, but they are potentially on the cusp of a much greater attempt. If China continues to suppress the native Uyghur culture and deny the people their political autonomy, Uyghur separatists could very well launch an independence movement.

In this globalized world all eyes will be trained on the face-off between China and its western borderland. The conflict would establish a precedent for Tibet, Mongolia, and all other ethnic minority groups in China. This would not be a political situation China can afford to ‘lose face’ in, or it risks losing control of other valuable border regions. However, recent increases in human rights concerns over the treatment of China’s minorities would require it to handle the situation with extreme delicacy.

All-in-all, Uyghur separatism has the potential to dramatically redefine minority right in China, as eventually Communist China will be forced, through either fear of an uprising or international pressure stemming from concerns over minority treatment, to answer the accusation and demands of the Uyghur people. And the momentum for this movement is largely a result of the Tarim mummies and their ability to attract positive international attention for the Uyghurs and help them to construct a narrative which gives them a claim to their ethnic homeland.

Examining the development of these relationships – between the Uyghurs and the mummies, the Chinese and the mummies, the Chinese and the Uyghurs, and each of the groups with the larger political world – has allowed for a unique perspective on ethnonationalism and nation building, one which offers scholars the opportunity to engage in and experience the effects of a constructed mythic narrative on a budding nationalist movement. Many scholars of post-colonial nationalism study their subjects
from the pages of history books, but the Uyghurs are still alive and kicking. Their growing strength is helping to bring the population of the ancient Tarim Basin back to life, and both the modern and ancient Tarim residents are beginning to claim their identities, together.
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