



## Oil and water: being Han in Xinjiang

Hilda Eitzen

To cite this article: Hilda Eitzen (2017): Oil and water: being Han in Xinjiang, Central Asian Survey, DOI: [10.1080/02634937.2017.1306341](https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2017.1306341)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2017.1306341>



Published online: 30 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 16



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Oil and water: being Han in Xinjiang**, by Tom Cliff, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2016, 280 pp., \$30.00, ISBN 978-0-226-36013-3

This book presents a timely and provocative analysis into Xinjiang Province, China's westernmost province and largest administrative region. Xinjiang, China's 'new frontier', internalizes paradox: both laboratory and laggard, the western borderlands offer opportunity even as they mandate closure. In an era when frontiers and borders in national policy and international dialogue are hotly debated, Cliff's account offers insights into China-specific scenarios. Rather than launching into top-down diagnostics of national policy, Cliff thoroughly situates his analysis in the local experience of Han Chinese living in the frontier, before building momentum to address the macro-perspective: China's centre-periphery policy. In so doing, Cliff reveals a case study in which China's evolving state-society relationship emerges as an interactive process rather than a deterministic mandate.

The analysis of Han Chinese experience of Xinjiang represents a departure from those accounts of the region focusing on Han vs. Uyghur bifurcations. While crucial to the Xinjiang story, the 'Uyghur question' too often conflates complex regional and socio-political dynamics into simplistic binary opposition, short-changing the full scope of evolving dynamics along China's western borderlands. Just as Uyghur ethnicity attests to variegated legacies (Gladney 1990; Rudelson 1998), so too the Han Chinese presence in Xinjiang engages multidimensional frames of socio-economic, political and historical reference. As Cliff relates it, the most prominent of these frames of reference coalesce around two primary resource streams: water resource management and oil exploration and production.

The Korla environs, the setting of Cliff's ethnography, comprises a periphery within the periphery. Located in southern Xinjiang's semi-desert expanse, Korla lies apart from the industrial activity of Urumqi, Xinjiang's northerly capital, as well as the Uyghur domains of the southern oases. Korla constituted an empty template where China's centre could realize the conjoined projects of land reclamation and cultural cultivation, as Cliff articulates in Chapters 1 and 2. Beginning in the early 1950s, a large influx of Han migrants responded to the call of the young PRC to 'defend the border and open up the wasteland'. As members of the *bingtuan* (Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps), soldier-farmers built up extensive irrigation systems supporting tracts of agrarian land, revisiting a project with antecedents in Qing Dynasty frontier strategy. In the 1990s, a second wave of Han Chinese migration followed the discovery of oil in the Tarim Basin. With skyscrapers of steel and glass abutting up against desert rubble, Korla City achieved the prestigious award for All China Civilized City in 2009, installing a visual signpost for other provincial centres to follow (38–39). While some critique Korla as a 'civilized city without culture' (39), for many it operates as a relative outpost of civility for Han Chinese seeking prosperity, progress and belonging in the absence of the illustrious eastern metropole.

Through interview and interactive scenario, accompanied by photographic image, Cliff explores different life trajectories of local Han residents as they construct meaningful livelihoods and conceptualize their place along China's frontier. In Cliff's account, the *bingtuan* emerges as not a faceless tool of state surveillance but a hardscrabble group of pioneers eking out a living on the land. Despite their varied backgrounds, what unites the perspective of many long-term Han locals is their commitment to engaging in work not just for personal profit but also as benefit to the national interest. They distinguish themselves from mere

entrepreneurs, viewing themselves as 'constructors' (*jianshezhe*) invested in both soil and social project. Even for those who have moved through the ranks to gain elite managerial jobs in the lucrative oil industry (Chapters 3 and 4), personal narratives are framed by sacrifice for the greater good of the state. The expectation of their investment in the frontier presupposes a future payoff for themselves and their progeny.

Still, as Cliff's account further elucidates, a job secured within the gated residential-work complex of the Tarim Oilfield Company, a subsidiary of China National Petroleum Corporation, is not necessarily a guarantee of future job security. With the technological advances of the state-owned enterprises eroding human capital, many positions have translated into temporary and contract work, without long-term security. In the oil complex, stratifications between permanent, contract and temporary workers leave laid-off teachers, technicians, and other part-time personnel waiting for new opportunities. In cases where institutional support is insufficient, the Han practice of *guanxi* (socio-political networking), as Cliff illustrates in Chapter 5, acts to mitigate risk or circumvent the limitations of formal authority. Still, according to several oil managers expressing their viewpoints in Chapter 6, the heavy involvement of state-owned enterprises in Xinjiang perpetuates an inherent structural dependency. What becomes clear is that the jockeying for social position and work hierarchy is primarily conducted and conceptualized as an intra-Han issue, with Uyghurs largely peripheral to the picture.

In July 2009, when an outbreak of Han-Uyghur tension in Urumqi erupted into violence, with leaked closed-circuit TV footage circulating images of Uyghur men and women kicking a prone Han Chinese, outrage exploded among Han in Korla and throughout Xinjiang. As Cliff recounts in Chapter 7, local Han blamed the central government for not being sufficiently vigilant for the sake of those who had taken on the task of securing China's frontier. They felt entitled to better security and protection. The central government responded quickly to the Han protests, jettisoning the Party secretary. A raft of state-sponsored reforms, including cash and in-kind benefits, were swiftly rolled out: counterpart assistance from wealthier eastern provinces; new methods of price-based calculation of oil revenues benefiting local government rather than the centre; training and reemployment programmes for both Han and Uyghur, along with basic-income guarantees; and the elevation of Korla's special economic zone to national status, while creating additional special economic zones.

The aftermath of the Han-Uyghur tensions in 2009 adds a new chapter to the carefully calibrated policies between China's centre and periphery, where flexible concessions alternate with hard-line tactics (Chapter 7). One notable omission from Cliff's account is the launching of the ambitious One Belt, One Road policy in 2013 and its implications for Xinjiang. This latter-day Silk Road, financed by China's cash reserves and public-private sector agreements, highlights Xinjiang's position of potentially hosting key connective corridors designed to link Central Asia to the Middle East and Europe. According to one Chinese media source, this new open access to China through Xinjiang may exacerbate 'Islamic risk' (Mei 2016), even as it internationalizes opportunity. In either case, posits Cliff, disenfranchised Han – whether the *bingtuan* underclass or newer Han migrants with little income and less loyalty to the central government – may amplify risks to state stability, compounding putative risks such as Islamic extremism. Uyghur conflict percolating on the frontier becomes the surrogate for more diffuse tensions and social disparities. The frontier becomes the litmus test for the centre. Cliff reaches the counter-intuitive conclusion that it ultimately behoves both centre and periphery to maintain their disparity, despite the goal of integration. The Chinese centre's paternal status is legitimated by the existence of the periphery. Meanwhile, the frontier validates the centre, while benefitting from development assistance that accrues to its singular position.

## References

- Gladney, Dru. 1990. "The Ethnogenesis of the Uighur." *Central Asian Survey* 9 (1): 1–28. DOI: [10.1080/02634939008400687](https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939008400687). Routledge: Taylor Francis Group.
- Mei, Xinyu. 2016. Op-Ed. "Preventing Risk of Extremism on 'Belt and Road'." *Global Times*, December 15. Accessed January 10, 2017. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1023876.shtml>.
- Rudelson, Justin. 1998. *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism along China's Silk Road*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hilda Eitzen

 [hceitzen@gmail.com](mailto:hceitzen@gmail.com)

© 2017 Hilda Eitzen

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2017.1306341>

