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Non-Fiction

'Oil and Water: Being Han in Xinjiang', by Tom Cliff

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The region of Xinjiang shares much with other areas of Central Asia: a harsh climate, rich natural resources and an ethnically divided society where stability is regularly threatened by violence and terror.

But Xinjiang is in China. And here social divisions between the indigenous Muslim Uighurs and incoming migrants have arisen in large part from Beijing's choice to develop the area by populating it with members of China's ethnic majority, the Han. For centuries warlords had threatened to splinter a region brought under Chinese control in the 18th century, and breakaway republics were briefly established in the 1930s and 1940s. But in the 1950s, China's party-state began sending Han workers and soldiers to Xinjiang, in the country's far north-west, where they were instructed to build the Chinese nation.

In *Oil and Water*, anthropologist Tom Cliff uses a blend of personal histories, theory and photography to detail the lives and ambitions of the settlers. Cliff argues that, in the eyes of the Chinese state, Xinjiang's problems are not a function of insufficient support and understanding for the local populations. Rather, they are a function of insufficient numbers of Han migrants, who are seen as bringing positive cultural change to the region — in other words, making it more like the rest of China.

Cliff focuses on the city of Korla, a Han outpost in central Xinjiang. Located in the middle of a desert, the town's economy is built around the Tarim Oilfield Company, a powerful centrally owned enterprise. Its employees live in walled compounds seen as bastions of development, largely cut off from their Uighur neighbours.

Getting ahead in Korla is almost always a function of how close you can get to the state, and much of the book explores the ways settlers move their lives and careers forward in a land they view as foreign but also theirs to claim. The Han refer to themselves as *jianshezhe*, "builders", who see "civilising" the region as a prime responsibility.

Cliff brings a fresh perspective to a poorly understood problem — one that is becoming increasingly important as China opens new trade routes through the region as part of the Belt

and Road initiative, a geopolitical move to increase China's influence and engagement with Eurasia and Africa.

To many local Uighurs, the near monopoly of Xinjiang's resources and high-powered jobs by Han settlers appears a lot like colonisation. Cliff does not use the word himself, but notes that the Han view of locals smacks of imperialism. The Uighurs feel their culture, faith and economic security are under threat, and regular restrictions on religious practice and the imprisonment of Uighur activists serve to deepen that fear.

The resentment caused by these inequalities underlies violence, the most dramatic outburst of which was the Urumqi riots in July 2009, when more than 100 people died in clashes on the streets of the provincial capital. The spark for the trouble in Urumqi was a factory brawl that took place on the other side of China several days earlier, resulting in the death of two Uighur migrants.

Human rights groups and western scholars see such outbreaks as a repressed Uighur minority lashing out. The government line is that radicalised Uighurs instigate violence at the behest of international Islamist terrorist groups.

Both of these ways of explaining the tensions lack an understanding of how the Han settlers see the events and how this has had an impact on policy, according to Cliff. To them the riots in Urumqi — known simply as 7/5 — are comparable to 9/11, and served principally to increase mistrust of the Uighurs by the Han.

For both settlers and local officials, the problem underlying instability in the region is simply a lack of boots on the ground. The belief is that, eventually, separatism and resistance will become impossible, purely by dint of numbers. As the settlers put it: "We [Han] outnumber them, so if it came to a vote, we would win." Given the absence of democracy, Cliff interprets this as meaning: "If it comes to a fight, we will win."

Oil and Water: Being Han in Xinjiang, by Tom Cliff, *University of Chicago Press*, RRP£23.20/\$30, 280 pages

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