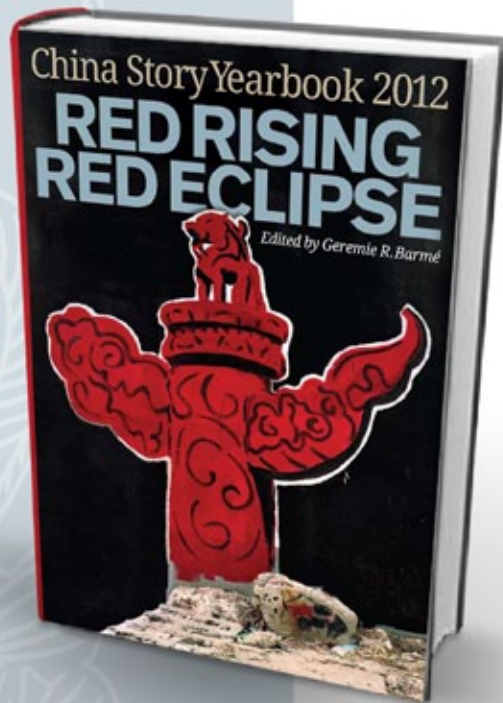




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ANXIETIES IN TIBET AND XINJIANG

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ANXIETIES IN TIBET AND XINJIANG

PROTEST IN TIBET (*Xizang* 西藏)

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In the People's Republic, the far western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang are both officially known as 'autonomous regions'. The dominant ethnic groups – Tibetans and Uyghurs – are supposed to enjoy a certain amount of self-governance. But this formal administrative approach, coupled with enormous investment in the local economy and infrastructure, has done little to ease ethnic tensions, nor to allay fears of economic marginalization caused by extensive Han Chinese immigration and worries that educational and religious policies are stifling Tibetan and Uyghur cultures.

On 10 March 2008, a small group of monks in Lhasa organized a street protest to commemorate the forty-ninth anniversary of the Tibetan uprising of 1959, which had led to the Dalai Lama fleeing Tibet for India. These initial peaceful protests were soon quelled but, on 14 March, new protests erupted involving laypeople which quickly turned into a riot that *The Economist* correspondent James Miles described as: 'calculated targeted violence against...ethnic Han Chinese living in Lhasa, but also members of the Muslim Hui minority.' The resulting burning, looting and killing was inter-

national news, and the unrest quickly spread to other areas of Tibetan China. According to the Xinhua News Agency, the death toll in Lhasa was eighteen civilians and one police officer, along with some protesters, although the Tibetan government-in-exile claimed that eighty people had lost their lives in the tumult.

While the Chinese government declared that the riots were instigated by the 'Dalai Clique' as part of a strategy to focus international attention on the Tibet question during the Olympic year, other observers noted the ongoing frustration of Tibetans at controls over their religious life, and some argued that this was due to increasing economic marginalization. Outside of China, activists opposing Chinese rule in Tibet organized demonstrations at Chinese embassies and at the Olympic torch rallies that China had organized in France, the US and other countries in the run up to the XXIXth Olympiad to be held in Beijing in August 2008. One particular incident, the snatching

of the Olympic Torch from the hands of a Chinese participant in a wheelchair caused particular outrage. A group of young Beijing-based people launched the website AntiCNN.com to track and criticize Western media coverage of China on this and other issues. This site and official Chinese reports of the protests enraged young Chinese Internet users who decried perceived biases in Western press accounts, including the erroneous and misleading use of photos depicting soldiers in Nepal beating rioters. Some Chinese 'patriotic youths' uploaded homemade propaganda videos to the Internet asserting that: 'Tibet is, always was, and always will be part of China.'

By the end of March 2008, Chinese security forces had imposed military rule on Lhasa, with armed paramilitary units stationed at each crossroads in the Tibetan quarter of Lhasa on twenty-four hour duty (the first time since 1990, a situation that continues at the time of writing). In the months (and years) following the

riots, strict controls at monasteries were increased (major monasteries were emptied of all monks from other areas; hundreds were held in detention centres for several months; re-education drives were resumed; and, new regulations were brought in to tighten control in monasteries and over Tibetans from outlying areas). Government propaganda emphasized the investments and economic benefits that Beijing's rule was bringing to Tibet. But tensions continued.

On 27 February 2009, a monk in Ngaba county (a Tibetan area in Sichuan province) set himself on fire while shouting slogans calling for Tibetan independence. His was the first of a wave of self-immolations: from mid-March 2009 to June 2012, Tibetan exile groups reported that thirty-seven people, mostly current or former monks and nuns in their early twenties, had set themselves on fire in towns and villages all over the Tibetan plateau, including in the Tibet Autonomous Region, and Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan provinces.

In February 2012, the Dalai Lama blamed the fatal protests on a policy of 'cultural genocide' being carried out in China. Beijing officials accused him or his 'clique' of instigating the self-immolations and called them a form of 'suicide terrorism' and an attempt to 'internationalise the Tibet issue'. In February 2012, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao declared that the immolators were 'innocents', signalling a softening of tone, but exiles and their leaders were still accused of encouraging them.

In May 2012, separate meetings between the Dalai Lama and British Prime Minister David Cameron, and Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann were condemned by the Chinese government with boilerplate rhetoric: such meetings constituted 'interference in China's internal affairs' that 'hurt the feelings of the Chinese people'. In early June 2012, a blanket ban was placed on non-Chinese tourism to the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

TENSIONS IN XINJIANG 新疆

On 5 July 2009, an ethnic riot broke out in Ürümqi (capital city of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) that lasted for several days. Nearly 200 people died, and more than a thousand were injured, most of them Han Chinese. The event that triggered the riots was the death of two Uyghur migrant workers on 26 June at a toy factory in Shaoguan, Guangdong province after a dispute with Han Chinese workers. Han Chinese residents of Ürümqi fought back against the Uyghur rampage by taking to the streets in groups, armed with clubs and knives. Security forces took several days to quell the riots. Hundreds of Uyghurs were arrested, and Internet and long distance telephony in Xinjiang were shut down for more than six months.

The Chinese government blamed Rebiya Kadeer and exile Uyghur groups for instigating the riots. Unlike the Tibetans, the Uyghurs had never had a credible government in exile, or a strong activist force. Until recently, they did not have a charismatic fig-

urehead. Kadeer, a prominent Uyghur businesswoman and former member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, stepped in to fill that gap. Her business and political career in China ended in 2000 when she was convicted of the crime of 'endangering state security' after she allegedly sent information about events in Xinjiang to exile Uyghur groups. Released in 2005, she went into exile in the United States where she has taken on an increasingly prominent role as an activist for Uyghur causes and an advocate of Uyghur autonomy. Kadeer denied that she had had any part in the riots.

The Chinese government's explanations for ethnic tensions in Xinjiang follow the same template used to explain Tibetan problems: focusing on what they say are machinations of Kadeer and hostile foreign forces that seek to split China. But the 2009 riots also caused discussions in the Chinese media and by academics about China's ethnic policies, and arguments that

China might learn from the 'melting pot' approach of the US, rather than separating minorities into 'autonomous' regions and counties, and offering them privileges such as the right to have more than one child per family. These ideas have been discussed by government officials; the state response has instead been to announce plans to increase investment and infrastructure construction in Xinjiang and the Party secretaries of Ürümqi and Xinjiang were replaced.

However, relations between Uyghurs and the government and Han Chinese residents of Xinjiang remain tense. On 30 and 31 July 2011, two separate knife and bomb attacks in the far western city of Kashgar (*Kashi* 喀什) resulted in at least eight deaths and dozens of injuries; some foreign media reports said thirty-two people had died. Government statements blamed the attacks on Uyghur separatists with Jihadist motives. In February 2012, state media reported that twelve people died after riots broke out near

Kashgar. Police said that Uyghurs armed with knives had killed ten people, while two Uyghurs were shot dead by security forces.

