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## FROM UYGHURS TO KASHGARIS (AND BACK?)

MIGRATION AND CROSS-BORDER INTERACTIONS  
BETWEEN XINJIANG AND PAKISTAN

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## ABSTRACT:

China and Pakistan share a common border, formally established in 1963, and a close friendship which, to a certain extent, is a direct consequence of that agreement. Somewhat surprisingly the two countries managed to maintain - and even improve - their friendly ties in spite of several events which might have undermined the basis of their friendship. Particularly, since September 11, 2001, China has condemned various incidents in its Muslim province of Xinjiang as connected to the global jihad, often holding Pakistan-based Uyghur militants responsible and accusing Islamabad of not doing enough to prevent violence from spreading into Chinese territory. Within a scenario of growing insecurity for the whole region, in this paper I show how China's influence in Pakistan goes well beyond the mere government-to-government level. Particularly, I address the hitherto unstudied case of the Uyghur community of Pakistan, the Kashgaris, a group of migrants who left Xinjiang over the course of the last century. This paper, based on four months of fieldwork in Pakistan, aims principally at offering an overview of the history and current situation of the Uyghur community of Pakistan. It thus first examines the migration of the Uyghur families to Pakistan according to several interviews with elder members of the community. Secondly, it addresses some recent developments within the community, and focuses particularly on the influence China is exercising over it since the creation of the Overseas Chinese Association in 2003. Eventually, it suggests that since the opening of the Karakoram Highway in 1982 a variety of factors - among which figures primarily this recent Chinese interest - have caused an important political divide within the community, and brought to a re-definition of the Kashgaris' identity vis-à-vis both Xinjiang and Pakistan.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

China and Pakistan share a common border, formally established in 1963, and a close friendship which, to a certain extent, is a direct consequence of that agreement. Since then, and particularly over the course of the last two decades, leaders of both countries have not missed the opportunity to remark that their relation is “higher than the Himalaya and deeper than the Indian Ocean”, and even “sweeter than honey”.<sup>1</sup> To a certain extent this pompous vocabulary seems to take concrete form in various coordinated projects, and thus in the constant effort to improve the economic ties between the two countries. Obviously, the most outstanding result of this relationship is represented by the Karakoram Highway (KKH), which connects Kashgar, in China’s Xinjiang region, to Islamabad through the 4,693-meter high Khunjerab Pass. The road, open to civilian traffic since 1982, is today the main element of another major project, the so-called “economic corridor” which should connect Xinjiang to the Chinese-built Gwadar port, in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan.

Somewhat surprisingly the two countries managed to maintain - and even improve, if possible - their friendly ties in spite of several events which might have undermined the basis of their friendship. Particularly, since September 11, 2001, China has condemned various incidents in its Muslim province of Xinjiang as connected to the global jihad. Chinese authorities individuated in the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) a major threat to stability in Xinjiang, pointing out that this Uyghur terrorist organization is based in the north of Pakistan, in the lawless areas which border Afghanistan. In a few cases, Chinese authorities went as far as to directly blaming Pakistan for not doing enough to prevent violence from spreading into Chinese territory, and despite the lack of evidence provided Islamabad has repeatedly stressed its commitment to fight the ETIM and any other Uyghur terrorist organization active on its soil.

Today, as tensions in Xinjiang seem to be once again arising, and with the questions raised by the upcoming withdrawal of United States-led forces from Afghanistan, in this paper I show how China’s influence in Pakistan goes well beyond the mere government-to-government level. Particularly, I address the hitherto unstudied case of the Uyghur community of Pakistan, the Kashgaris, a group of migrants who left Xinjiang over the course of the last century. This paper, based on four months of fieldwork in Pakistan between February and June 2013, aims principally at offering an overview of the situation of the Uyghur community of Pakistan, and it is thus divided in two parts. In the first part I examine the migration of the Uyghur families to Pakistan according to several interviews with elder members of the community. In the second half I analyze the current situation of the community, and particularly

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<sup>1</sup> “China-Pakistan friendship ‘sweeter than honey’, says Nawaz Sharif”, July 5, 2013, The Telegraph (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/10161516/China-Pakistan-friendship-sweeter-than-honey-says-Nawaz-Sharif.html>).

the influence China is exercising over it since the creation of the Overseas Chinese Association in 2003. More generally, I eventually suggest that since the opening of the Karakoram Highway a variety of factors have caused an important political divide within the community, and brought to a re-definition of the Kashgaris' identity vis-à-vis both Xinjiang and Pakistan.

## 2. UYGHURS AND KASHGARIS

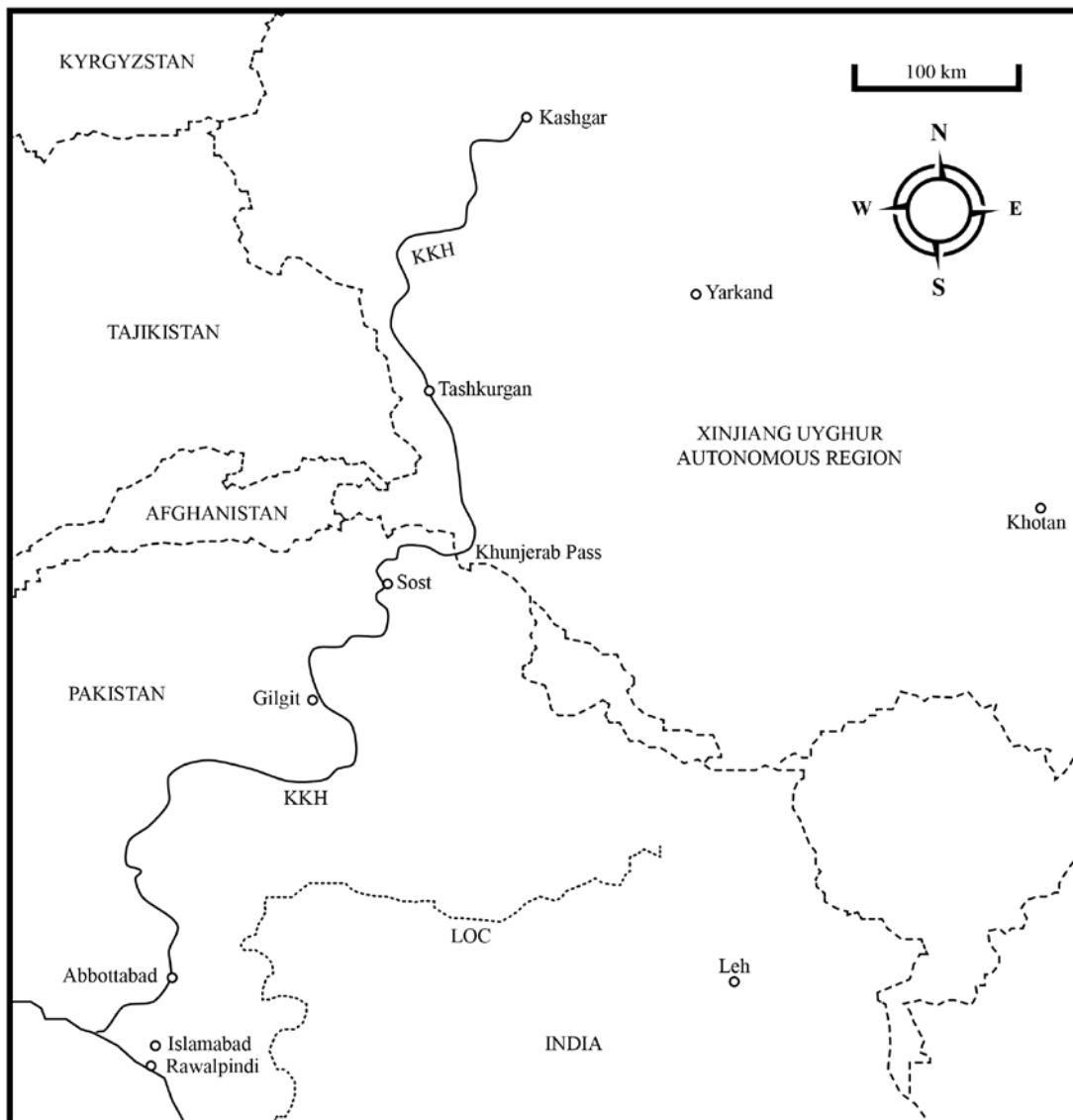
The Uyghurs are one of the recognized 55 ethnic minorities (*shǎoshù mínzú*) in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and mostly live in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) where they make up for about the 44% of the population (down from 75% in 1953).<sup>2</sup> The largest of China's administrative regions, Xinjiang borders eight countries - Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Most Uyghurs are Sunni Muslims, they speak a Turkic language very close to modern Uzbek, claim to be the original inhabitants of Xinjiang, and generally regard themselves as culturally and ethnically closer to their central Asian neighbours rather than to the Han Chinese which make up for the majority of China's population. Over the last few decades, and in particular since the Beijing Olympic Games of 2008 and the Urumqi riots of 2009, Xinjiang and the Uyghurs have repeatedly been at the centre of news and speculations in connection with several acts of violence and terrorism. Although most western experts agree that the roots of the problems are internal, and generally lies in China's discriminatory policies toward its ethnic minorities (Mackerras 2001; Millward 2004; Bovingdon 2010), PRC officials have blamed most attacks on Uyghur separatist groups abroad, particularly in Pakistan and Central Asia, where several thousand Uyghur expatriates live (Roberts 1998, 2012).

Although an official estimate does not exist, there seem to be about 300 Uyghur families currently living in Pakistan. Roughly two thirds of them live in Rawalpindi, the others mostly in Gilgit, but a few families can also be found in Lahore, Karachi and Peshawar. Among them I have met labourers, businessmen, software engineers, university students and politicians. In Rawalpindi, the largest Uyghur community lives in Westridge, where many used to work in a wool mill owned by a now deceased Uyghur migrant. After the mill closed, in the 1990s, many went to find jobs and - at times - housing in other parts of town, or even abroad, yet Westridge remains today the heart of the Uyghur community in Pakistan. They all moved to Pakistan from Xinjiang - or what was known as Chinese (or Eastern) Turkestan - between the 1930s and the 1990s, sometimes together with other families who continued their journeys toward other countries: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Germany, and the United States in particular. In today's Pakistan, those Uyghur migrants are well integrated within the local communities where they live, and if in some cases they are still referred to as "Turki" or "Kashgari", in other cases people do not even seem to know about their background.

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<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to the history of Xinjiang and its current situation see Millward (2007); Starr (2004).

## 2. Uyghurs and Kashgaris



In this work I refer to the Uyghurs of Pakistan as “Kashgaris”. As it will become clear throughout the paper, not all of them refer to themselves as Kashgaris. Some use the word “Turki”, others “Uyghurs”, others “ex-Chinese” or, even, “Chinese”. In this paper I refer to them, however, as Kashgaris, partly because it is the most used, and partly because the other ethnonyms carry a specific political meaning. “Turki”, for instance, is generally connected with separatist and pan-turkic movements in Xinjiang, and the expressions “Turkestan” and “East-Turkestan” have been banned by the PRC. Echoes of this have reached Pakistan as well. In the Kashgari neighbourhood in Westridge, the local mosque used to be called, in their honour, “Turkestani”, until the local authorities under pressure from the Chinese government decided to change the name. The Kashgaris, then, are not only well aware of how politically charged those expressions are, but also sensitive to the influence Chinese authorities seem to have over the local, Pakistani government. Both the expression “ex-Chinese” and “Chinese”, on the other hand, seem to be a recent development connected with the institution, in Pakistan, of an Overseas Chinese Association. As it

## 2. Uyghurs and Kashgaris

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will become clear throughout the paper, the Overseas Chinese Association has contributed to the redefinition of Kashgari identity, and to its division along political lines. Most Kashgaris who refer to themselves as “ex-Chinese”, in this sense, are very close to the activities of the Association, and thus to the Chinese embassy in Islamabad.

The word Kashgari, eventually, comes from the city of Kashgar, which is not where most Kashgaris are from, but which gave its name to the whole community. One of the reasons for this might be that the ethnonym “Uyghur” became used in Xinjiang only in the 1930s, as it was introduced by Soviet and Chinese ethnographers to define the Turkic-speaking inhabitants of the south of Xinjiang, which at that time referred to themselves either as “Turki” (from their language family), “Muslim” (from their religion), or according to the city they were from: “Kashgari” (*Kashgarlik*); “Khotani” (*Khotanlik*); “Yarkandi” (*Yarkandlik*), and so on (Gladney 1990, 1998). For instance then, in the British sources on Xinjiang-Ladakh trade, Turkic traders from the southern oasis of Xinjiang were either called “Turki” or “Yarkandi”, as Yarkand was one of the main hubs of the trade and, likely, where most traders were from (Shaw 1871; Knight 1893, Warikoo 1996, Thampi 2010). In the case of Pakistan it is likely that most Uyghur migrants became known as Kashgaris for the simple reason that Kashgar was - and still is - the main hub of China-Pakistan trade, the closest destination for Pakistan traders and, inevitably, Xinjiang’s most famous city in Pakistan. Although, then, many migrants were originally from Yarkand, Khotan, Artush and other oasis, it was the fame of Kashgar that gave them their name, with which many ended up identifying themselves.

According to my interviews, since the earliest migrants in the 1940s the Kashgaris managed to remain united and maintained a specific, Kashgari, identity. Although it is virtually impossible to verify the validity of what might be interpreted as an imagined, retrospective narrative, there are a few indications that support it, at least partly. Most Kashgari families, in fact, seem to have married within the community, and I was often told that as a result now the Kashgaris were “one big family”, as they all are related to each other in some way. Most Kashgaris, moreover, seem to maintain close contacts with other Kashgari families living in different cities within Pakistan, and although I could not witness it I was told that members of the community usually get together during special occasions, such as weddings and religious festivals. And yet, at the same time, I was often told that, until recently, the Kashgaris did not have any awareness about their history and culture, nor about their distinctiveness in both China and Pakistan. This seems to have started to change only recently, particularly as after the Karakoram Highway was opened (1982) many Kashgaris managed to travel back to their homeland, while thousands of Xinjiang Uyghurs visited Pakistan for different reasons. In Pakistan, those people did not only bring new Chinese goods and information about relatives and friends in Xinjiang, but also a new, well-defined Uyghur identity: something that did not exist at the time of the first migrants, in the 1940s. Now, by the 1990s and early 2000s, the Kashgaris are not only facing a changed political landscape and renewed relations with Xinjiang, but are also struggling to place themselves, as Kashgaris, in a context

## 2. Uyghurs and Kashgaris

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which defines them either as Uyghurs, Overseas Chinese, or Pakistani. In this sense, the Kashgari community had to face an incredible challenge, namely that of placing itself with its fragmentary and limited history, within established narratives of ethnic, national and political affiliation. I argue that the various, ongoing struggles which now seem to torment the community are precisely the result of this encounter, leading to directions which are still unclear.

A final point, eventually, has to be made about the existence of the Kashgaris as a “community”, as I will often refer to them throughout this paper. It could be argued, in fact, that by seeing themselves as a community, the Kashgaris are only projecting an a posteriori, constructed image over their past, a retrospective narrative of some kind. Although I find this to be an important point, and one that surely needs further inquiry, it is not the object of this paper, and the questions it arises cannot be answered based on the data that I have collected. Answering this question, then, would require further fieldwork and analysis, its scope being well beyond the aims of my research. The existence of the Kashgaris as a community, then, is not simply taken for granted in this paper, but must be rather understood as a temporary construction, an oversimplification perhaps, surely a mean toward the main objective of the paper: an introduction to the history, lives and aspirations of this group of migrants. In order to do so I shall, as anticipated, start from the very beginning of the Kashgaris’ history in Pakistan: the migration from Xinjiang.



### 3. MIGRATION

As it emerged from my interviews the migration of most Kashgari families occurred out of self-initiative. Even when the border was officially sealed some families managed to climb across the high passes of the Karakoram into Pakistan, yet the migration did not happen in a political vacuum, and various circumstances affected the process. The China-Pakistan border, in other words, remains necessarily porous, and if its closure did not effectively stop people from crossing - or trying to cross - it, its opening in certain historical moments certainly facilitated the movement. Hence keeping in mind that people kept crossing the Karakoram passes throughout the whole 20th century, in this section I am going to identify several moments when this occurred on a larger scale, and I shall accordingly discuss various stories that I have collected during my fieldwork.<sup>3</sup> I should also point out that in this work I limit my analysis to the migration out of today's Xinjiang toward today's Pakistan, and thus do not aim at writing a comprehensive history of cross-border mobility during those decades.<sup>4</sup>

#### EARLY MIGRATION

The earlier Kashgari migrants I interviewed moved to Pakistan just before the partition of the sub-continent (1947) and the foundation of the People's Republic of China (1949). Many, simply, left Xinjiang for the hajj and could not go back because the border was sealed, while others decided to stay in Pakistan for their faith or their fear of the communists. I was for instance told that in 1948-9 about 500 people moved to Pakistan from Yarkand, apparently afraid of the People's Liberation Army's advance in Xinjiang. Some of them were rich families of traders with an established network of contacts in the region, others were farmers with little or no experience of the world outside of their native villages. For all of them the journey was not easy, and at least 100 people died during the two-month trek from Yarkand to Gilgit. Those who made it, eventually, settled in Parri, a small village south of Gilgit, along today's Karakoram Highway, where they built houses and began farming. Many more, I was told, died because of the different environmental conditions, the food and the altitude - although, in fact, Parri is only about 1.500 meters above sea level. After a few years, however, water scarcity in Parri forced most Kashgari families to leave the village, and as many moved to Gilgit others went to Rawalpindi, to the extent that today not one family of Kashgaris lives in Parri anymore. Other Uyghurs who moved during those years went straight to live in Gilgit, and at least a couple of them opened nan bakeries and *mantu*<sup>5</sup> shops, which are still much appreciated by locals in today's Gilgit.

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<sup>3</sup> Some of those stories have appeared in a short piece I wrote for *The Diplomat* (Rippa 2013).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of Xinjiang's relations with its neighbouring countries see Roberts 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Manta, in Uyghur, a typical kind of dumplings usually filled with lamb meat and onions very common in Xinjiang, and now quite popular in Gilgit too.

### 3. Migration

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Many, for those very reasons, moved in the years following the establishment of the PRC, when the new government did not control Xinjiang's border and crossing was still easy. Frequently mentioned in the course of my interviews was for instance an uprising which took place in Khotan in 1954 (Dillon 2004: 54), after which many Uyghurs involved decided to leave Xinjiang fearing repercussions for them and their families. Thus according to my sources and to Rahman's (2005) account, many Uyghur families moved to Pakistan in those years, between 1954 and 1956 (50).

Most Kashgaris, moreover, seem to have moved to Pakistan during the 11 years of Ayub Khan's presidency, between 1958 and 1969. It was precisely the second president of Pakistan who facilitated their transfer to Pakistan, a movement which many considered a "return" rather than a migration. As Abdulaziz, a Kashgari trader from Gilgit, told me during one interview: "There are four kinds of us [Kashgaris]: those who are originally Pathan, those who are originally from Baltistan, and those who are originally from [Indian] Kashmir. And there are those, like us, who are 100% Uyghurs" (July 18, 2013). In fact, most Kashgaris seem to have south Asian origins, as before the 1940s it was not rare for Kashmiri or Pashtun traders to marry a Uyghur woman and move to south Xinjiang<sup>6</sup>. In most cases it was precisely the fact that those migrants carried a British passport that allowed them, eventually, to move back to Pakistan during Ayub Khan's government.

A few elderly Kashgaris I have interviewed in Rawalpindi still remembered their journey through the Karakoram. They all gave me similar accounts not only of the long and tiring route, but also of the reasons they decided to leave Xinjiang: their family's properties nationalized by the Maoist state, the famine brought by the failure of the Great Leap Forward, restrictions to their religious practices. They were all fleeing a Communist state for a Muslim country, and according to Ayub Khan's policy they were immediately given Pakistani citizenship and 500 rupees each at their arrival in their new country. They all, eventually, managed to go back to Xinjiang and visit what was left of their families only two decades later, once the KKH was open.

To add even more complexity, however, I have also met families who managed to leave Xinjiang during the 1960s without having any previous relations with the sub-continent. In many cases, moreover, they did not move directly to Pakistan, but went to Afghanistan which, in those years, had a more relaxed immigration policy. For most, Afghanistan represented simply a step in a longer trip, of which usually the final destinations were Turkey, Europe or the United States. I have also met a couple of men who, however, ended up staying in Afghanistan for most of their lives, struggling through the country's troublesome history. Eventually, they both moved to Pakistan during the last two decades, as many other Afghans did, and ended up in Rawalpindi, in the Kashgari neighbourhood.

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<sup>6</sup> On trans-Himalayan trade and the role of Indian traders in Xinjiang see in particular Warikoo 1996; Thampi 2010; Rizvi 1996 and 1999.

## THE KARAKORAM HIGHWAY

Given the little historic material in our possession, the lack of a comprehensive survey, the diversity of each individual story, and the unique opinion that each Kashgari seems to have about the migration from Xinjiang, it is simply not possible to map out with precision the origins and the current composition of the Kashgari community. The situation, moreover, seems to remain fluid and susceptible to additional changes, as since the Karakoram Highway was opened a new wave of Uyghur migrants moved to Pakistan. In this section I analyze precisely the impact of the Karakoram Highway on the Kashgaris, this time not only in terms of mono-directional migration but rather in terms of bi-directional movements across the China-Pakistan border.

Although the Karakoram Highway was completed in 1978, it was open to civilian traffic only since 1982 (Kreutzmann 1991: 725). For many Kashgaris it was the first opportunity they had in over three decades to travel to their homeland, and most of them took their families with them for the journey. Hence the opening of the KKH had a significant impact not only of the whole economy of the mountain regions, as it has already been documented,<sup>7</sup> but also on the lives of the few hundred families of Kashgaris living in Pakistan. The Highway, moreover, opened up new possibilities for mobility across the Karakoram, and a variety of people took advantage of the political relaxation in the PRC and travelled to and from Pakistan for different purposes.

Although the focus of this paper are the Kashgaris, in what follows I shall briefly analyze the various groups of Xinjiang Uyghurs which, for various reasons, visited Pakistan since the opening of the Karakoram Highway. Although only few of them settled in Pakistan, they generally interacted with the Kashgaris, and thus had a significant impact on this community. Eventually, I shall briefly address the issue of trans-border trade, and the role that the Kashgaris played in it.

## PILGRIMS

As during most of the history of interactions between Central and South Asia, with the opening of the KKH traders and pilgrims became once again the main force of cross-border mobility in the area. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and, particularly, of Mao's death (1976), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) moved toward more tolerant policies in an attempt to regain support among the non-Han people of Xinjiang. Together with a return to a non-assimilationist policy, the early 1980s marked a period of religious and cultural freedom for the Uyghurs. As a consequence thousands of mosques and madrassas were reopened or constructed, and

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<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the construction of the Karakoram Highway and its impact on the economy of Gilgit-Baltistan (formerly known as the Northern Areas) see Kreutzmann 1991, Stellrecht 1997, Haines 2012.

many took advantages of this situation to conduct the hajj pilgrimage which was resumed in 1979 after fifteen years of interruption (Shichor 2005: 122; also Waite 2006: 254-5). Pakistan, like in the 1930s, maintained a major role as a transit point for Uyghur pilgrims, and Islamabad also allowed many of them to study in its universities, and to settle as Pakistani citizens. In 1985 about 1200 pilgrims crossed into Pakistan in order to reach Saudi Arabia for the hajj. As in the past they also brought various (Chinese) goods with them, and thus through this informal, individual form of trade covered part of their expenses (Kreutzmann 1991: 725).

Once in Pakistan those pilgrims usually had to wait a few weeks for their Saudi visas to be processed in Islamabad, and an important network of support was developed by the local Kashgari community. Haider (2005), in an article on the Karakoram Highway partly based on fieldwork among Pakistani traders in Xinjiang, claims that “most of the Uighur settlements that can be found in Pakistan today were established in the 1980s as transit points on the way to Mecca” (525). According to my own interviews in Pakistan this seems to be incorrect, as most Uyghur pilgrims ended up staying either in a Kashgari neighbourhood, or in specific “houses” set up with the help of the Kashgari community. The pilgrims, in other words, favoured the help of the Kashgari network in settlements that existed since well before the opening of the KKH.

Particularly significant in this regard was the area of the so-called China Market, in Rawalpindi (see below). Here wealthy Uyghurs from Saudi Arabia donated two houses – named Khotan House and Kashgar House – which functioned as free-of-charge hotels for Uyghur pilgrims. Opened in 1986, Khotan House is a three-floor building with a few dozen rooms overlooking a small courtyard. Each room has two bunk beds and a small table, while half of the courtyard is occupied by a pray ground covered with small rugs. The only piece of decoration is an old picture showing General Zia-ul-Haq and the Chinese consul welcoming a group of Uyghur pilgrims. During my visit I was told that at times pilgrims were so numerous that many had to sleep on the naked floor in the rooms and in the courtyard. None of them was ever charged a single rupee for their stay, yet local Uyghurs made a profit in other ways, such as providing food, guidance and translation services to the pilgrims. In 2006, the Chinese and Saudi governments signed an agreement that allowed pilgrims to fly directly from Beijing, and Uyghurs from Xinjiang stopped going to Pakistan on their way to the hajj. Kashgar House and Khotan House closed after 20 years, and the buildings are now used by Kashgari traders as warehouses.

## MILITANTS

The Soviet war in Afghanistan, when China joined the anti-Russian coalition, was another factor that contributed to the movement of Xinjiang’s Uyghurs to, and through, Pakistan. As reported by Fuller and Lipman (2004), it has been estimated by Chinese sources that “as many as 10,000 Uyghurs had travelled to Pakistan for religious schooling and “military training”” (342). What the Chinese government did

not mention is that during the time of the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, Beijing provided over \$400 million in military aid to the *mujāhidīn* (Cooley 2002: 60). According to Cooley, China provided the anti-Soviet jihadists with arms and advisors, all flowing into Afghanistan through the established network of the refugee camps in Peshawar, Pakistan. Moreover, in 1985, training camps were opened near Kashgar and Khotan, where militants learned the use of “Chinese weapons, explosives and PLA [People’s Liberation Army] combat tactics” (Cooley 2002: 59). Although it remains difficult to estimate how many Uyghurs were actually trained in Pakistan during these years, and their experiences go far beyond the purpose of this paper, during my interviews in Pakistan the issue of Uyghur militants and *mujāhidīn* came up frequently, as I shall discuss later in this paper.<sup>8</sup>

## LATE MIGRANTS

Only a small minority of today’s Kashgaris moved to Pakistan after the opening of the KKH. I have personally met only a few of them, in Gilgit and Rawalpindi, and they generally seemed to have moved for religious and political reasons. Particularly interesting, and exceptional in several ways, was the case of a Shia family originally from Yarkand who moved to Gilgit in 1986<sup>9</sup>. Since the father was a government official, he and all his family managed to obtain passports, with which they travelled to Pakistan on a three-month visa. Once there, they kept extending it, until the two brothers married local Shia women and by 1999 they all obtained Pakistani citizenship. When they came to Pakistan they were only five but now they are a big family of fourteen, living in a big house purchased with the income of two “mantu” shops. Moreover, they are “Sayyid”, descendants of the Prophet, and thus, I was told, were always well treated and respected, and by no means regret the decision of moving to Gilgit.

In Rawalpindi, on the other hand, a few families migrated to Pakistan during the late 1980s and early 1990s. I was told that the last family move in 1997, and that nobody managed to come and settle in Pakistan after that. Although, in fact, I did not meet anybody who came after 1997, I cannot exclude with certainty that it did not happen, yet it seems likely that most of the Uyghurs who came to Pakistan after the Karakoram Highway was open and did not go back to Xinjiang, ended up living in other countries, mostly Turkey, Germany, and the United States. Pakistan, in oth-

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<sup>8</sup> Various analysts (Rashid 2002: 204, Christoffersen 2007: 52), have highlighted the presence of Uyghur militants in Pakistan since the 1980s, often adding that many were enrolled as students in local madrassas. Unfortunately we do not seem to have enough information to either sustain or dismiss those claims, particularly when it comes to the current capability of those groups, and the assertive language of Rashid and others has thus been criticized by several Xinjiang experts (Bovingdon 2010: 135-6). For a thoughtful critique of the existing literature on Uyghur terrorist groups see Roberts (2012), who also highlight how, despite the lack of evidence, the narrative of “Uyghur terrorism” has emerged as an established reality.

<sup>9</sup> Uyghurs are virtually all Sunni, and with the exception of the Tajik Ismaili community in the area of Tashkurgan, Shia presence in China has traditionally been considered virtually irrelevant (Israeli 2002: 147-164). The community to which this family used to belong, then, is that of a small – and hitherto unstudied – Shia group in the area of Yarkand, probably counting not more than one thousand members.

er words, became a gateway not only for Uyghur pilgrims, but also for asylum seekers and migrants headed to countries further west. According to my experience in south Xinjiang, in fact, although most Uyghurs - particularly of the youngest generations - dream of going abroad, Pakistan does not present a popular destination.

## **BUSINESS ACROSS THE KARAKORAM: THE ROLE OF THE KASHGARIS IN CHINA-PAKISTAN TRADE**

Most Kashgaris took the opportunity offered by the opening of the KKH to visit their families back in Xinjiang, and many of them used their connections and language skills to launch profitable import-export businesses. Back then, Sultan Khan, a preeminent member of Gilgit's Kashgari community, told me, "the Xinjiang government invited us to visit China and do business there". This move was part of a greater strategy, as since the beginning of the period of reforms the Chinese government encouraged minorities to develop trade relations with the neighbouring countries (Haider 2005: 525). Deng Xiaoping viewed this as a process that may help the minorities' modernisation, as well as a way to develop more friendly relations with the neighbouring Muslim countries (Dreyer 1993: 377). Many Uyghurs in Xinjiang took advantage from those new policies and re-established a lucrative trade on the routes that connected Xinjiang with its neighbourhoods in the north and in the west (Roberts 2004: 218-225; Millward 2007: 288-93). Others - a minority compared to those who went to Central Asia - focused their attention and investment towards Pakistan. Yet an important part of the Xinjiang-Pakistan trade volume in those early years seemed to be in the hand of the Kashgaris.

Similarly to what happens today, the bulk of the trade consisted of Chinese consumer goods, crockery, shoes and garments produced in the south of China and often brought to the markets in Xinjiang by Uyghur traders. Another major import was silk, and this seems to be the main product traded by the Kashgaris I have met in Pakistan. In the China Market in Rawalpindi a few of the silk shops are still owned by Kashgaris, but I was regularly told that due to the depreciation of the Pakistani rupee and the growing number of Pashtun traders, this business was not as profitable as it used to be. In fact, since the late 1990s, Uyghurs and Kashgaris both lost their respective advantages in the Karakoram Highway trade, and were soon replaced by Han Chinese companies and Pashtun traders. Today, only a minority of Kashgaris is still involved with cross-border trade, while only a handful of Uyghurs from Xinjiang still manage to visit Pakistan regularly for business purposes.

This recent dynamic is quite visible in the China Market itself. The China Market occupies the southern part of Gordon College Road, in the centre of Rawalpindi. Like other bazaars in town, the China Market is made up of different buildings and shops, with offices on higher floors and warehouses in the basements. The activity

is frenetic, with cars and motorbikes dangerously driving through the crowds, young boys carrying trays with half dozen chai cups from the shops to the small stall where an older man is busy making the tea and pouring it. Nearby, a famous restaurant attracts hungry customers lining up for its famous pilau, while outside boxes of goods are continuously loaded and unloaded to and from all kinds of vehicles. The China Market, in other words, resembles any other market in Rawalpindi, if it was not for one particular element: all commodities sold and exchanged here are imported from China, either from the KKH or via sea route, from Karachi. The origin of the goods is remarked by the names of most shops and malls, which make the China Market rather unique: "China town", "China shopping center", "China store", "New China market", "Beijing shopping center", "Uromqi [sic!] Plaza", and so on. Today, most shops in the China market still deal with silk and fabric, yet a variety of other products is also present: stationery, toys, cookware, furniture, plastic flowers and other kinds of decorations, fake bags and wallets, and so on. After several visits to the China Market and interviews with various businessmen there, I was able to conclude that not only the overwhelming majority of the goods was imported through Karachi, but also that Kashgari traders represented only a minority. Most traders, in fact, were either Pashtun or Punjabi, with only a few Kashgaris and Gilgit-Baltistani.

To conclude, it would be difficult to underestimate the impact of the opening of the Karakoram Highway on the Kashgari community. The road, together with the new policies brought about by Deng Xiaoping, allowed many Kashgaris to travel back to their homeland, often for the first time, and for many Xinjiang Uyghurs to travel abroad, both for business and pilgrimage. Those Xinjiang Uyghurs were an important source of information for the Kashgaris. Their tales about Xinjiang, I was repeatedly told, were often the only information Kashgaris managed to have from Xinjiang, and they served the important purpose of re-establishing a connection between this small group of people and its geographical and cultural heartland. Uyghur militants, on the other hand, had a significant, yet in this case largely indirect, impact on the community. Because of them, the Kashgaris are often perceived - by Xinjiang Uyghurs and other Uyghur groups abroad - as dangerous and, as I was personally told several times, "religious extremists". Although I could not find any direct connection between the Kashgaris and the Uyghur militants allegedly active in the north of Pakistan, certainly the Kashgaris were affected in terms of their reputation, and they seemed very well aware of it. Eventually, as I shall show in the next section, the opening of the KKH brought the Chinese state back into the Kashgaris' lives, particularly through the activities of the Overseas Chinese Association.

## 4. CHINA AND THE KASHGARIS

Since they settled in Pakistan most Kashgaris had virtually nothing to do with the Chinese government. Most of them obtained Pakistani citizenship as they arrived in their new country, and did not seek any relations with PRC authorities. Nor did Beijing. In the course of my interviews I was repeatedly told that, until recently, the Uyghur community of Pakistan seemed of little or no concern to China. It was only in 1988 that the Chinese government sent its first Uyghur official to the Islamabad Embassy, with the specific purpose of dealing “with affairs related to Uighur expatriates” (Rahman 2005: 1). This decision did not end well for the Chinese authorities, as the young Uyghur diplomat left his post after only 13 months, going on hiding as an Afghan refugee in Peshawar and eventually obtaining asylum from Switzerland where he wrote his memoir (Rahman 2005). Most Kashgaris I interviewed, moreover, agreed that Beijing began to actively interact with their community only after the 9/11 terrorist attack to the United States, when Pakistan suddenly found itself - once again - involved with a war in nearby Afghanistan, and the Kashgaris became one of the main concerns in China’s own “war on terror”. China’s interests in the Kashgaris became eventually particularly evident in the months that preceded the 2008 Beijing Olympics, when rumours of Pakistan-based Uyghur terrorists ready to target the Games were rampant.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, Pakistan’s strategic importance for China significantly increased (Yang and Siddiqi 2011), yet at the same time the instability of the country and China’s concern with the situation in Xinjiang brought to a redefinition of China’s policies toward its “all weather” ally. Duchâtel (2011), for instance, individuates two main adjustments: sustaining a pro-China “United Front”, and reassessing Pakistan’s strategic value. If the second “adjustment” is of little concern here, what Duchâtel calls “United Front” consists essentially of cultivating relations with a wide range of actors, from civilian parties to the military, to religious groups and important members of the civil society. This is generally done through the Chinese embassy in Islamabad, and builds upon the principle of “neutrality”, which means that when an internal conflict emerges China refrains from taking side and thus avoids making enemies (551-3). It consists, in other words, of a network of relationships cultivated through time and skilful diplomacy, that the Chinese government can use in time of needs. As part of this effort, I argue, China has since the early 2000s sought to influence the Uyghur community of Pakistan through the institution of the “Overseas Chinese Association”.

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<sup>10</sup> In 2008 several bombs were detonated on buses in Urumqi and Kunming, with the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) claiming responsibility, while in March 2008 a Uyghur woman travelling on a Pakistani passport was stopped from lighting a container filled with petrol on a flight from Urumqi to Beijing. For an analysis of those incidents see Pantucci and Schwarck 2014: 10.



## THE OVERSEAS CHINESE ASSOCIATION

Virtually all the Kashgaris I have talked to in Pakistan were involved with the activities of the Overseas Chinese Association, which many, particularly in Rawalpindi, called “ex-Chinese Association”. The “Association” does not have an office, but it has two presidents and two chairmen, for Gilgit and Rawalpindi, respectively. It was them who managed the money provided by the Chinese embassy, which they had to distribute to the community.

The Association was created in 2003. Sultan Khan, chairman of the Association for Gilgit-Baltistan, told me that it was the “Chinese High Commission in Pakistan” which asked them to form “an association of ex-Chinese”. The embassy, Sultan Khan explained, wanted to know the strength of the community so that they could economically support it. I was then told that since 2003 the Association has received about 16 million rupees (\$150,000) from the Chinese embassy. Sultan Khan also confirmed that in 2013 alone the Chinese High Commission in Pakistan released the amount of 4 million rupees, which in Gilgit was distributed in the following way: 5.000 for each student and 10.000 each to about thirty Kashgari widows. Although there is not a significant community of Kashgaris living outside of Rawalpindi and Gilgit, various members of the Association told me that they were in contacts with families in Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar and even Chitral. I once was even shown a list with the names of about two dozen Kashgari Children from Chitral, who were also receiving some financial help for their school fees.

Not everybody in the community, however, is pleased with the conduct of the Association and the way it deals with the funding it receives from the Chinese embassy. A Kashgari man whose family moved from Yarkand in 1952 and who preferred to stay anonymous, told me his opinion - which I have then found shared by many others - in the following words. “The Chinese government isn’t really doing anything for us,” he whispered as we chatted in a small teahouse in the centre of Gilgit, “they give money to some people, but then these people use the money for themselves and the others don’t get anything.” The Association, in fact, operates with little transparency. Nobody was either able or willing to tell me how the money was distributed, or based on what criteria some people received scholarships and benefits. Everybody, however, directed me to one person: Raza Khan.

Raza Khan, whose mother was Uyghur and father Pashtun, has been the leader of the Overseas Chinese Association since its foundation. A wealthy businessman and owner of a steel mill and other activities in Islamabad, Raza Khan was well known and respected by most of the Kashgaris I met. Unfortunately, he died during the time of my fieldwork, and I only had the opportunity to speak briefly on the phone with him. I learned, however, that he directly received the funding for the Association from the Chinese embassy in Islamabad, and that he personally distributed it to local leaders in Rawalpindi and Gilgit.

After Raza Khan's death, he was replaced as president of the Association by his younger brother, Nasir Khan, who was also chosen by the Chinese ambassador in Pakistan. The chairman of the Rawalpindi section of the Association is Abdul Hakeem Haji, a respected elderly member of the community whose family owns a fabric shop in the China Market, at the ground floor of the Khotan House. Unfortunately, due to his age Abdul Hakeem rarely visits his shop, and although I pressed his relatives asking for an interview with him in several occasions, I had to eventually realize that he simply did not want to talk to me about the Association. I had much less problems with the Gilgit section of the Association, as I talked to both the president, Abdul Qayyum, and the chairman, Sultan Khan, on several occasions. I met both of them in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, which due to their businesses is where they spend most part of the year, but in Gilgit I have managed to talk to several of their relatives and others involved with the Association. I thus managed to obtain a comprehensive picture of how the Association works, and, most importantly, of how it is differently perceived by various groups within the community of Kashgaris. The main task of the Association was toward the education of the young sons and daughters of the Kashgaris. In this sense, all Kashgari kids in primary and middle school had their school fees paid, or at least partly covered, by the Association. In addition to this, the Association also claimed to provide financial help to Kashgari widows and other needy members of the community, while also a limited number of scholarships for higher education in Beijing are available. If, then, the payment of school fees is well accepted by all Kashgaris, the criteria according to which other financial help and scholarship are provided are the source of important friction within the community. The main problem is that there does not seem to be any principle, or at least guideline, for the selection of the beneficiaries, and the whole process is far from transparent.

Raza Khan's most severe critic is surely Umer, who told me his story over the course of several meetings at his house in Rawalpindi. Umer's family was originally from Kashgar, and moved to Pakistan in 1948. Born in Rawalpindi, he worked in Saudi Arabia with his brother for a few years, as many Pakistanis did in the 1970s and 1980s. When he came back to Pakistan, between 1986 and 2006, he was in charge of Khotan House and Kashgar House. In 2008, Umer founded with his brother and four other people the Umer Uyghur Trust, with the aim of teaching Uyghur language and culture to the youngest generations of Kashgaris in Rawalpindi. "Education," Umer said over lunch at his house, "is the basic right of every person. We just want to teach our culture and our language to our children." With this purpose Umer opened a small school near his house, in Westridge, where most Kashgaris live. Soon after the school was opened he received several visits from different "Pakistani agencies" pressuring him to close it, as, according to them, it was endangering the good relations between China and Pakistan. He told me that the agencies made him an offer in lieu of the Chinese embassy, that he would be given "financial aid" and benefits if he stopped his activities. He did not. Eventually, Umer claimed, under Chinese pressure a group of (Pakistani) men from some (Pakistani) agency came to the school and destroyed everything, while his name and that of his brother were put on the Exit Control List, thus preventing them from leaving the country.

The story was picked up by Radio Free Asia,<sup>11</sup> and their reports, together with a reportage by the Japanese NHK,<sup>12</sup> a NBC News article<sup>13</sup> and a few propagandistic Chinese language pieces<sup>14</sup> are the only material available on the Kashgari community. Umer was accused of carrying on illegal activities in his school, and of being in contact with Rebiya Kadeer and the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), which the Chinese government considers a terrorist organization and holds responsible for the deadly Urumqi riots of 2009 (Millward 2009, Roberts 2012).<sup>15</sup> Umer, on the other hand, told me that his connection with Rebiya Kadeer and various Uyghur NGOs in Turkey had nothing to do with politics, and that he simply aims to learn about Uyghur history and culture.

At the time Umer's school was forced to close, a new "Montessori school" opened in the neighbourhood. The principal of the school – a Punjabi man with little interest in political feuds within the community of Kashgaris – told me that he was first contacted by Raza Khan and the Overseas Chinese Association in 2010. They were interested, he told me, in opening a school in the area for the children of the Kashgari families. They eventually found a way to collaborate, and with the financial assistance of the Association the school is now moving into a new, four-floor building. The Chinese ambassador also visited the school, and donated 16 computers and books for the school's library. At the time we spoke, the principal told me that about 150 "Ex-Chinese" children - as he called the Kashgaris - were currently enrolled in the school, all their fees and expenses paid by the Association. "We also

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<sup>11</sup>"Language School Shuts Down", May 20, 2010, Radio Free Asia (<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/pressured-05192010164138.html>); "Uyghurs Face Travel Ban", June 23, 2011, Radio Free Asia (<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/pressured-05192010164138.html>).

<sup>12</sup> The video is available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPK-hP5t0MO>.

<sup>13</sup> "Uyghurs - Precariously caught between two powers", November 9, 2010, NBC News ([http://behindthewall.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2010/11/09/5435051-uyghurs-precariouly-caught-between-two-powers](http://behindthewall.nbcnews.com/_news/2010/11/09/5435051-uyghurs-precariouly-caught-between-two-powers))

<sup>14</sup> See for instance "Bājisītān wéizú huárén língxiù: Xīnjiāng wéizú rénguò de bǐ wǒmen hǎo (Pakistani Uyghur leader: Xinjiang Uyghurs live better than us)", July 19, 2009, Global Times (<http://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/hrdt/200907/19/172004.shtml>); "Zhù bājisītān shǐguǎn yǔ wéizú tóngbāo gòng qìng zāishēng jié (Embassy in Pakistan and Uyghur compatriots to celebrate Eid al-Adha)", October 29, 2012, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC ([http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_chn/gjhdq\\_603914/gj\\_603916/yz\\_603918/1206\\_604018/1206x2\\_604038/t983165.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/gjhdq_603914/gj_603916/yz_603918/1206_604018/1206x2_604038/t983165.shtml)); "Zhù bājisītān dàshǐ sūnwèidōng fù lā wǎ'ěr pǐn dì PEAK MONTESSORI xuéxiào kànwàng wéizú xuéshēng (Pakistan Ambassador Sun Weidong visits Uyghur students at Rawalpindi's Peak Montessori school)", December 31, 2013, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (<http://pk.chineseembassy.org/chn/sghd/t1113620.htm>).

<sup>15</sup> The World Uyghur Congress, founded in Munich in 2004, defines itself as an "umbrella organization" for exiled Uyghur groups. According to its mission statement "The main objective of the WUC is to promote democracy, human rights and freedom for the Uyghur people and use peaceful, nonviolent, and democratic means to determine their political future" (the complete version of the WUC mission statement is available online: [www.uyghurcongress.org](http://www.uyghurcongress.org)). The current president of the WUC, Rebiya Kadeer, was elected in 2006. Rebiya Kadeer, once a successful Uyghur businesswoman, was arrested in 1999 for her activism, and released only in 2005 under pressure from the United States, where she now lives in exile. The Chinese government, on the other hand, has added the WUC to its list of alleged terrorist organizations, and often accused the WUC of fomenting unrests in Xinjiang. For a comprehensive analysis of the WUC structure, its history and leadership, see Chen 2014; for an overview of Uyghur transnational organizations and their connection with both China and the WUC see Bovingdon 2010: 135-158.

have a plan to teach their language [Uyghur],” he told me, “but the Association is in charge of that and I honestly don’t know.”

The school itself thus became a symbol of China-Pakistan friendship. Around the various buildings there are several posters showing the Pakistani and Chinese flags one beside the other, and in the principal’s office I noticed several pictures taken when the works on the new section of the school began. They showed the principal shaking hands with the former Chinese ambassador Liu Jian, with Raza Khan and Abdul Hakeem in the background. In one occasion the principal took me on a little tour of the various classes, where he would ask the little students “who is an ex-Chinese?”, to which a group of kids would respond by raising their hands, telling me their names and confirming that they were, in fact, “ex-Chinese”.

For some of the Kashgaris living in Westridge, however, the school was not only a symbol of friendship. As I was told by a few elder members of the community, through the school the Chinese were simply trying to “bribe” the Kashgaris, so that they would not think about the various injustices China was committing in Xinjiang. Umer, obviously, was particularly critical of the new school. “The only reason Raza Khan made that school is because we made our own school,” he told me angrily once. “The [Chinese] embassy is using Raza Khan, he does everything they tell him to do. The embassy told him that we were manipulating Uyghur children in our school, and he had to make a new one. And you know why? Because he’s a good businessman, and he has a lot of contacts with Chinese companies.” Umer, moreover, did not seem to believe that Uyghur language will ever be taught at the Montessori school. “Even if they were to teach Uyghur,” he complained, “they will teach their own version of what Uyghur culture is, not what it really is.”

Umer has paid a personal price for his views and for his contacts with the WUC. Isolated within the community, and unable to go abroad, he however continued the activities of his “Umer Uyghur Trust”, distributing food to poor Uyghur families and organizing get-togethers for the most important Muslim festivals. As I was writing this paper, in April 2014, he informed me that after he and his brother appealed to the competent authorities, their names were finally removed from the Exit Control List. In his words, he praised Pakistan’s independent justice system, and remarked his determination to continue promoting Uyghur language, culture and education. Because of his idea, Umer also suffered on a more personal level, as the attitude of most Kashgaris toward him has changed. He has always been a leading, respected figure within the community, yet since his problems with the Chinese embassy began, most people tend to avoid him, although many remain sympathetic with his views. He is not critical of them, he knows that many have ongoing businesses in and with China, and that he could cause them troubles. While I was in Rawalpindi he always invited me to his house, but preferred not to be seen with me outside, particularly in the China market area. “If other Uyghurs see you with me”, he told me, “they won’t talk to you anymore”.

## 5. SITUATING THE KASHGARIS

### UYGHURS OR KASHGARIS, (EX-)CHINESE OR PAKISTANI?

As we drank several cups of tea in the back of his new shop in the China Market, Rawalpindi, where he sells Swiss watches, Sultan Khan tried to explain the peculiar position of the Kashgaris. “Our fathers are from Pakistan and our mothers from China,” he explained, “we belong to both countries and we represent an important bridge between them.” In the 1990s, for instance, he stressed that many Kashgaris used to work as interpreters and facilitators for the Uyghur pilgrims coming from Xinjiang. Others, like Sultan Khan himself, were doing business between the two countries. The in-between nature of the Kashgaris is difficult to contest. It emerges from their stories, and it is mirrored in their businesses and activities. It does not always represent, however, a comfortable situation. Abdullah, for instance, told me the following story. As many Kashgaris, Abdullah’s grandfather was a trader from Kashmir who settled in Yarkand, where Abdullah was born and raised before moving to Pakistan in 1967, when he was 15. He still remembers how, with his family, they climbed over the Karakoram range into Pakistan: “There was no proper road, we had to climb through narrow paths and I remember that we reached the border at sunset. Nobody was there, we slept under the open sky and in the morning we realized that my mother was dead. We buried her there, then we moved down toward Gilgit.” Abdullah married shortly after he arrived in Rawalpindi, and began to work at a local factory. Poor and uneducated, he managed to make just enough to sustain his family. Local Pakistanis treated them well, he told me, but from the beginning, for reasons probably due to their background and Central Asian look, they called them “Russians.” Now all he wants is good education for his children and grandchildren. By the end of his story, he was almost in tears: “I had no education in either China or Pakistan. I spent all my life in pain and anger. When I was young the Chinese snatched our land from my father, then they put him in jail. I came to Pakistan and people called me Russian, or Chinese. When I go to China they call me Pakistani. I didn’t have a life or an identity (*shanakht*), only hatred (*nafrat*).”

Sultan Khan and Abdullah embody, in a way, the two opposite outcomes of Kashgaris’ transnationalism, of different identities as both an opportunity and a burden. They also represent only two examples of the multiple and fragmented views that the Kashgaris have of themselves. Abdul Qayyum, the president of the Gilgit section of the Association, for instance told me very clearly that he considered Xinjiang his motherland, and that he was grateful to the Chinese government for what it was doing not only in Pakistan, but in Xinjiang too, where he had travelled dozens of time. Without me asking anything, he tried to convince me that most Uyghurs in Xinjiang support the Chinese government, that rumours of opposition or terrorism

were spread by partisan Western media.<sup>16</sup> In Pakistan too, he continued, the Kashgari families were not against the Chinese government, quite the contrary. He then went on praising the development of Xinjiang, claiming that “Kashgar, Yarkand, they are all developing. People in Tashkurgan are also very rich now. Fast development, they do a lot of business”. It was the typical rhetoric of the Chinese government, with some curious exaggerations, like when he told me that the first time he went to China, in 1983, he found it better than Europe, due to the wise communist policy of the PRC.

On the other hand of the spectrum, Umer carefully distanced himself - and to a certain extent the whole community - from what Sultan Khan or Abdul Qayyum told me. Umer’s problems started when he first contacted Rebiya Kadeer and the World Uyghur Congress, and although Umer claimed that he simply wanted to “learn” about his culture so that he could teach the Kashgari families, he ended up being deeply involved in the political rhetoric that characterizes the WUC. “China don’t want us to teach the Uyghur culture”, he angrily told me, “the only reason Pakistani government and agencies are tormenting us is [...] China. Pakistan is our own country, [...] we are not against the Pakistani government, *we are against the Chinese government*”. Then, contrarily to what Abdul Qayyum has told me, he highlighted how discriminated Uyghurs were in “East Turkestan”, the lack of human rights in his homeland, and even told me an anecdote about his mother who was ill-treated at Urumqi airport only because of her origins and relation with Umer.

Despite their different views, Umer and Abdul Qayyum share a similar past. Not only they are both the sons of migrants who came around the time of partition, but they both worked in Saudi Arabia for several years. They travelled to different countries, conducted business along the Karakoram Highway, and were involved with the thousands of Uyghur pilgrims who transited yearly through Pakistan. Yet at some point, for some reasons, their paths divided and went along different, opposite lines.

Moreover, between those two positions I have found a significant spectrum of opinions among the many Kashgaris I have interviewed. Several members of the Association, for instance, took good care in highlighting the point that the funding they were receiving were not coming from Beijing, but from the “Xinjiang government”, as to remark that their loyalty lied in the Western Regions of China, rather than at its political centre. One of them was Abdul Aziz, the only Kashgari I have met who was fluent in Mandarin. During a long conversation in his shop in Gilgit, where he sells blankets and cushions of all colours and sizes, he told me that his father came from Artush, near Kashgar, in 1949. He speaks Mandarin so well because he used to travel to China very often, on business, but now he has stopped doing that as there

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<sup>16</sup> In this particular conversation Abdul Qayyum was referring both to the coverage of Xinjiang by western media, and to the two Radio Free Asia articles about the Kashgari that I have already quoted in a previous footnote. He repeatedly stressed that “western media” were to blame for projecting a false image of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and in Pakistan, with the only objective to destabilizing China’s growth to the West’s advantage.

was too little margin for profit. He told me that his family left “because of Mao”, stressing the communists’ repressive religious policies and what he called the state-sponsored Han “invasion” of Xinjiang. He then told me that Xinjiang used to be called East Turkestan, and that he considered himself a “Turki”. We also talked about the Association, of which he was a member. He stressed that when he went to the Chinese embassy in Islamabad he was told that funding was coming from the Xinjiang government. The lack of a direct relation with Beijing, somehow, seemed to reassure him. “I’m OK with the Association”, he told me eventually, “whenever the Chinese give some money [to the Association], we also get some, for school fees and things like that”.

Others, on the other hand, insisted on calling themselves “Chinese”, or “Ex-Chinese”, and I was told several times that “Uyghur” and “Chinese” were the same thing. Here names played a very important role, and not only due to how the Kashgaris called themselves, but also about how they referred to their homeland: China, Xinjiang, or East Turkestan, and the ways they looked at their own history. Aziz, for instance, a Kashgari trader who owns a garment shop in the Beijing Shopping Center, in the China Market in Rawalpindi, told me his story in the following way: “We migrated to Pakistan in 1967 when I was 6 years old. [...] During the British rule over the subcontinent there was no border as such. I have heard from my parents that my grandfather and grand grandfather used to go to China for the purpose of trade. They got married there and settle there. In 1949 private property was nationalized in China, and this was probably one of the reasons for the migration to Pakistan. But we did not escape from China. [...] China gave us permission to migrate to China [because our forefather had British passports]”. Aziz, during the course of the whole interview, was very careful in choosing his words. He admitted that part of the reason his family left China was due to Mao’s new policies, but he never once criticized the Chinese government and repeatedly stressed that they did not “escape” from China. On the contrary, while talking about the current situation in Xinjiang, he told me that the Chinese government knew how to “provide justice for the masses” and “care for the poor population”. He was involved with the Association, and used to go to China several times each year. As some others, he rarely used the word “Xinjiang”, and never the expression “Turkestan”, rather referring to it as “China” and to himself as “Chinese”.

Not all Kashgaris, moreover, want to get involved with the Association’s activities. Habib is one of them. I was introduced to him as his father, I was told, was Kashgari, which I thought would make him a Kashgari too. Yet as soon as we met, Habib told me very clearly: “No, I don’t feel like that”. Habib is young, in his mid-twenties, he has a degree from a university in Karachi and at times works as a travel guide. His English is excellent, and over the course of a few interviews he told me the story of his family. Since he was a kid, for some reasons, Habib never wanted to have anything to do with his Uyghur background. Some of his brothers and sisters, for instance, learned to speak some Uyghur language from their father, but he always refused to speak it. Now he knows about the Association. “When they have meetings they invite me”, he told me once. “But I don’t know, I don’t want to go. I know

those people, they say that they help all the Kashgaris, but all they do is to keep the money for themselves. My family is different, we don't join them. When my father came [from Xinjiang] he was very poor. At first he was a manual labourer, then he was employed by the government, though in a low position. [...] I think we are the only Kashgari family whose children managed to study. The other families are rich, but they don't put their kids into school, they just give them business to handle. We are different, my father married a Gilgiti, and we always stayed close to my mother's family. I don't feel Kashgari at all, I think that many Kashgaris here in Gilgit don't even know we are Kashgaris".

### THE "OVERSEAS CHINESE" FRAMEWORK

China's relation with its overseas communities has been an important subject of analysis for several decades (Fitzgerald 1972; Hodder 1996; Tan 2014). In 1978, the establishment of the "Overseas Chinese Affairs Office" (*qiáobàn*) under the State Council was seen, in particular, as an implicit claim that the Overseas Chinese belonged to China, thus legitimizing "the work aimed at enhancing the symbolic affiliation and material contribution of the overseas Chinese to their homeland" (Barabantseva 2005: 4). Within this scheme, particularly since the period of reform, a remarkable number of associations were created among diasporic communities, often by traders and businessmen with connections to the Mainland. In 2002, as related by Barabantseva (2005), a programme called "Developing Motherland and Benefiting-Assisting Overseas Chinese" was created by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office. "This plan" she argues, "has a two-fold strategy. Firstly, it seeks to promote the interaction between old overseas Chinese communities, and new Chinese migrants. The second component of the plan involves work on enhancing connections between overseas Chinese communities and China. This plan is one example of a series of strategies employed by the Chinese nation-state to attach the overseas Chinese to the modernisation project in China. Another side of these strategies is to export the PRC's ideological presence in the Chinese communities abroad" (16). As part of the latter strategy, as Nyíri (1999) pointed out, the most recent Chinese overseas organizations have been either set up through the PRC's direct involvement, or are strongly oriented toward it.

If the establishment of the Overseas Chinese Association in Pakistan might well fit within the aims of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office's project, it also seems at the same time very distinct from them. Particularly, unlike the dynamic described by Barabantseva, in the case of the Uyghur community of Pakistan there is not any apparent economic interest by the Chinese government, and nothing to gain in terms of "modernization project in China". Quite the contrary. Formally at least, the Association in Pakistan was formed with the specific purpose of "supporting" the local Kashgari community. In the course of my interviews I was also told that in some cases the Chinese authorities offered to a few families the possibility to return to Xinjiang as Chinese citizens. A Kashgari trader from Gilgit, in particular, told me that he was offered a house in Kashgar, and various incentives to open a new busi-



ness within the new Kashgar's Special Economic Zone, with significant fiscal advantages. None of the Kashgaris I have met accepted those offers, claiming that they rather feel "at home" in Pakistan, where they are free to practice their religion. In this context, however, it is important to notice that the implementation of the Overseas Chinese Association in Pakistan does not seem to be based on the PRC's economic interests, but rather on China's objective to bring, somehow, this community closer to its economic and political principles.

Uyghurs, moreover, are a minority in China, a condition that adds another layer of complexity. In fact, the PRC's policy toward the Overseas Chinese is "tailored" to the Han (Barabantseva 2005: 29). Despite recent attempts by Chinese scholars to highlight the multi-national nature of the Chinese communities abroad, claiming their identities remains a "taboo zone" for the Chinese government. Barabantseva thus argues that although "these groups are not completely absent from the vocabulary of the PRC's officialdom", China seems to silently accord to the fact that "it does not have enough legitimacy to seek the loyalty of the Chinese ethnic minorities overseas" (Barabantseva 2005: 31). And yet the case of the Overseas Chinese Association in Pakistan seems to represent an exception. Although the language is not always clear, and members of the Association seem, at time, to be voluntarily ambiguous about it, the goal of the Association seems to be mostly political. Like with other - Han - overseas communities, in the case of the Uyghurs of Pakistan the Chinese government seems to make a considerable effort in trying to win the loyalty of this community, aligning it to its nationalist agenda.

In order to do so the Pakistani Overseas Chinese Association is not directly connected to Beijing and the central government, but rather to the Xinjiang government.<sup>17</sup> Here the main actor is the "Xinjiang Overseas Exchange Association" (*Xīnjiāng hǎiwài jiāoliú xiéhuì*), which was set up in 1992 in order to create a link between the "Overseas Chinese from Xinjiang" (*Xīnjiāng huáqiáo huárén*) living in countries like Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Australia, Canada, and so on<sup>18</sup>. Little known, recently, in 2013, the "Xinjiang Overseas Exchange Association" held its second General Conference, in Urumqi, while a few years before it briefly made the (Chinese) news for donating 200,000 RMB (about 32000 US Dollars) to the Pakistani community.<sup>19</sup> As part of the Association's attempt to draw the overseas

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<sup>17</sup> Xinjiang is formally an "autonomous region" (*zìzhì qū*) of the People's Republic of China. Unlike the Soviet model from which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took inspiration for its minority policy, however, China's autonomous regions remain under overarching control of the CCP, and do not have the right (even theoretical) to secede. Although, then, the local, Uyghur-lead government, maintains, on paper, vast power over the region, the ultimate authority is in the hands of the Xinjiang's CCP Secretary - a Han Chinese. (Millward and Tursun 2004: 87-98).

<sup>18</sup> "Xīnjiāng hǎiwài jiāoliú xiéhuì huànjìè jì dì èr jiè lǐshì dàhuì zhàokāi (Xinjiang Overseas Exchange Association convenes for re-election and Second General Conference), August 19, 2013, *China News* (Zhōngguó xīnwén wǎng) (<http://www.chinanews.com/zgqj/2013/08-19/5176811.shtml>)

<sup>19</sup> "Xīnjiāng hǎiwài jiāoliú xiéhuì wèiwèn bǎijīstǎn huárén huáqiáo (Xinjiang Overseas Chinese Association salutes Pakistan's Overseas Chinese)", July 17, 2008, Sina (<http://news.sina.com.cn/w/2008-07-17/163214178431s.shtml>); "Xīnjiāng hǎiwài jiāoliú xiéhuì xiàng bā huáqiáo huárén xiéhuì juānzèng 20 wàn yuán (Xinjiang Overseas Chinese Association donates 200000 yuan to Pakistan's

Xinjiang groups closer to the homeland, I was told in Pakistan that yearly visits to Xinjiang were organized for various members of the community. In a case, in 2012, a small delegation was invited to Beijing as part of the “Delegation of Overseas Chinese minorities from Xinjiang” (*Xīnjiāng shǎoshù mínzú huárén huáqiáo kǎochá tuán*). In a picture I was shown in a Kashgari shop in Gilgit, a group of about three dozen people gathered in one of Beijing’s largest “Xinjiang restaurant”, where they held a conference followed by a traditional Uyghur meal and dances.

As I have already shown, however, the Association’s goal to organize the Kashgaris into a loyal, pro-Beijing community of Overseas Chinese has only partly succeeded. In fact, though generating a renewed sense of belonging to a distinct, diasporic community, it promoted the fragmentation of the community along political lines: those who view positively the CCP’s rule over Xinjiang and those who, echoing the discourse of various Uyghur groups abroad, challenge it more or less openly.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Asked about the history of their community, most Kashgaris would point to September 11, 2001, as the day when things began to change dramatically for them. Shortly after the attacks on the United States, China highlighted the presence of Uyghur terrorists in Pakistan, and in a few years, through the Overseas Chinese Association, it began - almost for the first time - to actively interact with the Kashgaris. Squeezed between an Islamist threat, the economic power of the PRC, their own loyalties to both Xinjiang and Pakistan, the Kashgaris appeared to me as a community struggling to place itself in a world that, for them, had abruptly changed.

Based on the data I collected during my fieldwork I find it reasonable to conclude that since the opening of the Karakoram Highway various factors such as the facility for the Kashgaris to travel to Xinjiang, the flow of Uyghur pilgrims to Pakistan, the September 11 attacks and Beijing's war on terrorism, and the creation of the Overseas Chinese Association by the Chinese embassy in Islamabad, brought at least two major consequences: a re-definition (and for many, re-discovery) of a specific Kashgari identity, and a division of the community along political lines.

Those two elements emerged quite distinctively in the course of my interviews, where often Kashgaris would refer to a recent "re-discovery" of their history, of their culture, of their distinctiveness. Some of them called this a new "awareness", but on a general level I have found that the community was still struggling with what this implies. A young Kashgari synthesized it for me in the following way: "Now it feels like there are two separate communities [of Kashgaris], but I believe that in a few years it will be better. Before, the community was united, but without any awareness about our culture. Now - on the other hand - we know we are different from the Pakistani, we have this awareness".

Quite ironically then, it seems that a major cause for the division of the community along political lines was precisely the Association, which in the first place intended to "unite" the Kashgaris within the Overseas framework. In this sense, the route toward this new, "culturally aware", unity for the Kashgari community, seems still long and rugged. If, on one hand, Umer's criticism of the Association is harsh, on the other hand relevant members of the Association ostracize Umer and generally claim that he is working against the interests of the Kashgaris. To me, it seemed that the two groups were speaking two different, mutually unintelligible, languages. Most interestingly, they both recurred to established patterns and formulations rooted in the WUC (for Umer) and the CCP's (for the Association) rhetoric. Curiously then, for instance, their accounts of recent visits to Xinjiang were completely different. If, for Umer, Uyghurs in Xinjiang were exploited, their basic rights denied, for people like Abdul Qayyum Xinjiang was a peaceful and developed country, where Chinese government's policies were well accepted and implemented by the local population. In this sense, although it might not be possible to precisely trace the trajectories of

those competing, opposite views, particularly as politics seemed to be constantly mixed with personal rivalries, it seems clear how both groups are placing themselves within larger, established narratives.

As I have already anticipated in the first part of the paper, my conclusion is the following: since the opening of the Karakoram Highway and the arrival in Pakistan of various, competing narratives defining the Kashgaris either as Uyghur, (ex-)Chinese, or Pakistani, the ethnonym “Kashgari” with its fragmented and undefined history became not only inapt to the new circumstances, but also a threat to the survival of the community itself. In other words, in order to endure as a community, the Kashgaris had to re-shape their identity according to those newly arrived narratives, and thus, inevitably, ended up splitting along them in political terms. This ongoing process, this struggle, is visible in the lives and the tales of those people, and in the constant re-formulation of those narratives, within which their very lives and histories are now being placed.

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