

# The Uyghurs

## People Profile



**People**  
INTERNATIONAL

### Who are the Uyghurs?

The name 'Uyghur', also spelt 'Uighur' or 'Uyur', means 'united' or 'allied'. It describes the Turkic people group, forced from the Mongolian steppe during the 9th century AD to become oasis dwellers in the desert region of north-west China. Today, this remains their homeland and is known as The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Uyghurs themselves prefer to call their homeland 'East Turkestan'. Culturally they are similar to the Uzbeks. According to the Chinese government there are about 8,100,000 Uyghurs living in Xinjiang. However many Uyghurs themselves believe the figure is much higher. Another 350,000 Uyghurs live in Kazakhstan, 43,000 in Kyrgyzstan and 37,000 in Uzbekistan. Many of these Uyghurs fled Xinjiang for the former Soviet Union due to extreme hardships in China in the 1960s. Other populations are scattered through Australia, Central and South-East Asia, Europe, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the USA.



### Culture

**Ancient culture:** Discoveries at the end of the 19th century have shown that in ancient times the Uyghurs had a highly civilised culture rich in arts, architecture, music, literature and printing. These discoveries included cave temples, monastery ruins, wall-paintings, statues, frescoes, manuscripts, documents and books. Also there was evidence from 2700 years ago of a well-developed medical practice including a detailed description of acupuncture.

**Language:** Their Turkic language belongs to the Altaic family. The written language originally used an Arabic script. In the 1960s a romanised Uyghur script was introduced. Then in the 1980s, the government made another change, this time to a modified Arabic script. In the former Soviet Union, Uyghurs use a Cyrillic script.

**Recreation:** The Uyghurs are very hospitable people with a real passion for music, singing, dancing, drama and story-telling.

**Diet:** The Uyghur diet includes fatty mutton and rice. They also eat fruit, especially locally-grown melons, as well as flat bread, noodles and lamb. Many Uyghur houses have grape vines and fruit trees growing outside.

**Dress:** A few women wear veils, but the majority wear brightly coloured scarves, while the men traditionally wear distinct, embroidered skull caps, which vary in design from oasis to oasis.

### Economy

**Occupation:** Uyghurs tend to be traders in the urban areas (17%) and agriculturists in the rural areas (83%). They trade in sheep, cattle, spices, tools and metal chests, and also produce wool, silk, cotton, wheat, melons, carpets and petroleum products. Their perfect position in the mountains between the four great civilisations: Russian, Chinese, Indian and Iranian has given them a strategic advantage in trading, for centuries. About 25% of all Uyghurs are unemployed and the standard of living for a large percentage is very low, with poor sanitation and water supplies resulting in health problems such as cholera and hepatitis. Education levels are relatively low, as schools are small and child labour is often needed to supplement family income.

### Society

**Family Structure:** Traditionally the "Whitebeard" elder is head of the family and head of the community. Children obey their parents and the extended family is extremely close. This structure remains in the rural areas, but increasingly the strong family unit is in decline. Alcoholism, divorce, wife and child abuse and absent fathers are becoming more common. There is a growing drug problem too, especially with heroin, imported from other parts of Asia.



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## Nationalism in China

Xinjiang was taken by Chinese communists in 1950. The government sent 5 million Han Chinese into the region to anchor the province to China proper. Since then a number of human rights abuses have been committed against the Uyghurs, and a distinct class system has emerged. The Han are dominant in government, industry and merchant jobs in the North, earning 50% more than the Uyghurs, who dominate agriculture in the South. Many Uyghurs are taking up arms to gain freedom from the daily racial discrimination from China. In 1997 nearly 200 Uyghurs were killed by Chinese in the worst ethnic violence in China for 10 years. The bombings, torture and discrimination continue as the Uyghur separatists struggle for independence from China.

## Religious life and Islam

The Uyghurs were originally animists, worshipping nature spirits and consulting shamans or witch doctors. In the centuries before they turned to Islam, Uyghurs were influenced by Buddhism, a Persian religion called Manichaenism, and Nestorian Christianity. In the 9th Century, the Uyghurs converted to Islam, which is now seen as integral to their ethnic identity. They are officially classified as Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school, but most practise "folk Islam", including belief in the "Jinn" (evil spirits), "evil eye" (curses), amulets, and exorcisms. During the Cultural Revolution in China in the late 1960s most of the mosques were destroyed. Today many mosques have been re-built, and there are now about 15,000 in Xinjiang. In recent years Islam has probably been strengthened and there has been a growth in radical Islamic movements, but at the same time, many urban Uyghurs now see themselves as being "secular Turkic".

## Contact with Christianity

**History:** Beginning in the late 1800s a Swedish mission to Xinjiang led to the birth and growth of a Christian community. This group reached its peak with about 200 adult Uyghur believers before it was wiped out in a series of wars and persecutions in the 1930s. Fanatical Muslims destroyed the churches and massacred the Christians.

**The Uyghur Church Today:** The first modern Uyghur church was established in the mid-1990s in Kazakhstan. Since the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union there has been unprecedented spiritual hunger and encouraging growth of Christianity among Uyghurs. Now, in the year 2000, there are more than 500 known Uyghur Christians: about 440 in Kazakhstan, 25 in Kyrgyzstan and 50 in Xinjiang. Currently a number of missions are working with the Uyghur people, focusing on church planting, discipleship, biblical leadership training, song-writing in the Uyghur language and bible translation. The Uyghurs in China are less accessible to the Gospel than their neighbours, due to the oppressive Chinese government. There are several thousand Han Chinese Christians in Xinjiang and some of them have made attempts to overcome the cultural barriers and reach out to their Uyghur neighbours.

**Bible Translation:** Despite the encouraging signs, millions of Uyghurs remain unreached by the Gospel of Jesus. There are a number of ways the Gospel can be related to them, through radio, literature, music and drama. There is much scope for more creative distribution. Since 1984, work on translation of the scriptures into Uyghur has progressed and now the books of Genesis, Luke, John, Acts, and 1, 2 and 3 John are all available. This work has been slowed by difficulties of access to the area, and a lack of qualified Uyghur believers able to help.

## Please pray:

- That the peace of Christ will overcome divisions between the Uyghurs and the Chinese and for an end to the human rights violations in Xinjiang Province.
- That more Christian workers will go to live and work among the Uyghurs and be able to stay on a long-term basis.
- That the Chinese Christians will reach out to their Uyghur neighbours in culturally sensitive ways.
- For the translation of the scriptures into Uyghur, also for the production of Christian literature, radio and other media.
- That the Gospel will spread and that there may be revival among the Uyghurs.

## People International

*People International is working to bring the love of Christ to the Muslim peoples of Central Asia and to establish churches among them. These people include such groups as the Aimaq, Azeris, Baluchis, Bashkirs, Dagestanis, Hazaras, Hui, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Kurds, Pukhtuns, Tajiks, Tatars, Turkmens, Turks, Uyghurs and Uzbeks. People International is an interdenominational Christian mission, which has been in existence since 1979. Since that time, we have been researching, visiting and recruiting for Central Asia and making it known to the Christian church. We now have over 90 workers living in Central Asia, involved in church planting, friendship evangelism, Bible translation, literature distribution, medical work and teaching, among other things.*



**If you are interested in being involved in the work of reaching the Uyghur people, then please contact People International at:**  
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PO Box 158, Vaughn, WA 98394, USA, Ph: (253) 884 1933, E-mail: [HomeBaseUSA@compuserve.com](mailto:HomeBaseUSA@compuserve.com) OR  
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