



Media Advisory: Concern over the use of the inaccurate term “Chinese Muslim” to refer to Uyghurs

Contact: Uyghur American Association +1 (202) 349 1496

Although the use of the term “Chinese Muslim” to describe Uyghurs has decreased somewhat in recent months as the international community has gained a better understanding of Uyghurs’ identity and the oppression they face, the Uyghur American Association (UAA) remains concerned about the still frequent use of the term in the international media. Uyghurs are not, in fact, “Chinese Muslims”, and this term is inaccurate and misleading. UAA encourages the media and other organizations to refrain from using the term “Chinese Muslims”, and instead simply use the term “Uyghurs”.

The Uyghur people, who are indigenous to East Turkestan (also known as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the People’s Republic of China (PRC))ⁱ speak a Turkic language and possess a rich and distinctive culture that is closely related to that of their Central Asian brethren, in particular the Uzbeks. The more than 10 million Uyghurs who live within the PRC are ethnically and culturally distinct from the dominant ethnic group in China, known widely as the Han Chinese. Uyghurs are also ethnically and culturally distinct from the approximately 10 million Hui Muslims who live in northwest China and other areas of the PRC. Hui Muslims are generally considered to be ethnically Chinese, and they speak the Chinese language.

Referring to Uyghurs as Chinese Muslims, then, is akin to referring to Tibetans as “Chinese Buddhists”. The Tibetan people, whose own struggle for human rights and the preservation of their unique culture has many parallels to that of the Uyghur people, are culturally and ethnically distinct from the Han Chinese. To

refer to Tibetans as “Chinese Buddhists” would confuse them with the many ethnic Chinese Buddhists living in China and elsewhere around the world, and as the international community has long been familiar with the identity of the Tibetan people and their plight, this inaccurate terminology is never used.

Perhaps most importantly, Uyghurs do not refer to themselves as “Chinese Muslims”, regardless of whether or not they are Chinese citizens or whether they are living inside the borders of the People’s Republic of China or in other countries around the globe. UAA believes it is of fundamental importance to respect the terminology that an ethnic group or population uses to refer to itself, and give Uyghurs a voice in shaping their own identity. Furthermore, even the Chinese government, which has sought to dilute Uyghurs’ culture and assimilate Uyghurs into Han society, refers to Uyghurs by using the Chinese word for “Uyghur” and not by the Chinese word for “Chinese Muslim”.

Uyghurs choose to use “East Turkestan” to refer to their homeland, and not the official designation of the region by Chinese authorities in 1955 as “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region”. Similarly, Tibetans choose to refer to their homeland as “Tibet”, and not “Xizang Autonomous Region”, the name officially imposed on the region by the Chinese Communist government in 1964.

Use of the term ‘East Turkestan’ does not define a ‘pro-independence’ position. Instead, it is used by Uyghurs wishing to assert their cultural distinctiveness from China proper. ‘Xinjiang’, meaning ‘new boundary’ or ‘new realm’, was adopted by the Manchus in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and reflects the perspective of those who gave it this name. East Turkestan is the historic name of the region, which was invaded and occupied by the Manchus in 1884.

Uyghurs have struggled to preserve their identity in the face of an onslaught of government campaigns to Sinicize them and demonize their belief in Islam. Uyghurs’ assertions of their distinct ethnic identity are branded as “unpatriotic”. Uyghurs’ religious practices are tightly controlled by the state, and Chinese officials have suggested that even their language makes them vulnerable to terrorist influences.ⁱⁱ Uyghurs have not been given a choice in authorities’ removal of Uyghur as a language of instruction at all levels of education in East Turkestan.ⁱⁱⁱ Residents of Kashgar, a predominantly Uyghur city in southern East Turkestan that

is viewed as the cradle of Uyghur culture and civilization, were not consulted before officials launched the demolition of Kashgar's Old City and began destroying traditional patterns of Uyghur life.^{iv} Moreover, Uyghurs are not consulted in development projects designed by government authorities to raise the standard of living in East Turkestan, and they therefore reap few of the benefits engendered by such development.

An additional factor to consider when examining the merits of the term “Chinese Muslim” with respect to Uyghurs is the fact that a significant number of Uyghurs believe in Christianity. Christian Uyghurs also face harsh persecution at the hands of Chinese government authorities, as can be seen most prominently in the cases of Alimjan Yimit and Osman Imin, two Uyghurs who were recently imprisoned for preaching Christianity.^v

Outside of East Turkestan, there are significant populations of Uyghurs located in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Turkey, Australia, Germany and other European countries, Canada and the United States.

ⁱ The Uyghur people who live in East Turkestan are the descendants of the nomadic herders and oasis-based people who have lived in the region for thousands of years. Before the 20th century, there was no sizeable Han Chinese population in East Turkestan. See: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the Uyghurs of East Turkestan (also known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region or XUAR, People's Republic of China), Uyghur Human Rights Project, <http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/UNDRIP10-2-09.pdf>, available at: <http://docs.uyghuramerican.org/UNDRIP10-2-09.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ UAA concerned by top Chinese official's comments on language policy in East Turkestan, available at: <http://www.uhrp.org/articles/2232/1/UAA-concerned-by-top-Chinese-officials-comments-on-language-policy-in-East-Turkestan-/index.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Uyghur Language Under Attack: The Myth of “Bilingual” Education in the People's Republic of China, available at: <http://uhrp.org/docs/UyghurLanguageUnderAttack.pdf>.

^{iv} Bulldozers reducing Kashgar Old City to rubble, available at: <http://www.uhrp.org/articles/2316/1/Bulldozers-reducing-Kashgar-Old-City-to-rubble-/index.html>; and Kashgar demolition is a “serious political issue”: official document reveals aggressive nature of propaganda work used to enforce Kashgar resettlement, available at: <http://www.uhrp.org/articles/2348/1/Kashgar-demolition-is-a-quotserious-political-issuequot-official-document-reveals-aggressive-nature-of-propaganda-work-used-to-enforce-Kashgar-resettlement-/index.html>.

^v See Religious Persecution Case of Alimjan Yimit, Uyghur Christian Church Leader, Xinjiang, China, China Aid Association, December 23, 2009, available at: http://www.chinaaid.org/downloads/sb_chinaaid/23wedits.pdf.