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Roundtable on

China's Far West: Conditions in Xinjiang One Year After Demonstrations and Riots

Demographics and Development: Xinjiang Work Forum May 2010

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Thank you for the opportunity to present these remarks to you today. I am an Associate Professor of Geography and International Studies at Miami University. I have been conducting research on demographic and development issues in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of northwest China for twenty-five years. My remarks will focus on two facets concerning the policies outlined in the May 2010 Xinjiang Work Forum in China. The first is to situate the policies of the Xinjiang Work Forum within the general trends of China's development efforts in Xinjiang. I will discuss how economic

development varies in different parts of Xinjiang depending on local inputs of agriculture, industry and transportation access. I will examine the Xinjiang Work Forum and see how the stated goals of the Work Forum will impact the different areas of Xinjiang. The second is to examine the demographic components of Xinjiang. I will be talking about the distribution of population in Xinjiang. One focus is on the changing ethnic composition of Xinjiang in terms of Han, Uyghur, Kazakh and others. Another element to consider is migration within the region as well as the Han migration to Xinjiang. I will examine recent demographic trends.

What is now the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has been labeled a variety of names. This Inner Asian area is composed of the Tarim Basin, the Turpan Basin, the Dzungarian Basin, and the Ili Valley. This area is known as Eastern Turkistan to distinguish it from Western Turkistan, the former Soviet Central Asia. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the largest of China's political units, covers an area of 1,650,000 square kilometers, one-sixth of China's total area, three times the size of France. Xinjiang now has a population of 21 million. Located in the northwest of China, Xinjiang is bounded on the northeast by Mongolia, on the west by Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and on the south by Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Xinjiang's eastern borders front Gansu, Qinghai, and Tibet (Figure 1).

Economic development

China started the Western Development Program in 1999 to address some of the regional inequities faced by China's western regions in comparison to the more

developed eastern portions of China. China's development programs are addressed to the needs of its various regions. The current policies outlined by the Xinjiang Work Forum expand on the Western Development Program.

Developmental change occurs in Xinjiang based on the dynamism of the region. Xinjiang is composed as well of different localities that vary in character and responses to government policies. The traditional economic landscapes of this Silk Road region were herding, oasis agriculture, and trade. On top of that the state has added the modern including distribution (road, rail, air), as well as production (oil, textiles, agri-business) and consumption (urban and rural).

The state's project of developing Xinjiang restructured the economic landscape. Transportation linkages lead to Urumqi and thence to Beijing in a hierarchical centralized fashion. Traditional economic centers such as Kashgar, Turpan, and Gulja are superseded by Urumqi's industries based petrochemical and textiles. Oil found in the north at Karamay (black oil in Uyghur) and the current oil exploration in the Tarim has added to Xinjiang's economic value to China. Oasis agriculture by the Uyghurs and animal herding by the Kazaks were superseded by commercial agriculture on state farms. The state created the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) out of demobilized elements of the People's Liberation Army in the 1950s to run the state farms. The XPCC still runs these state farms and has branched out into industry as well. . In terms of consumption, Urumqi has been the focus of the economy with people paying high prices, earning not so high wages and living in high rises. In rural areas in the south farther from the markets, people still live in poverty. Border trade was nonexistent in the 1960s, limited in the 1970s, and grew in the 1980s-1990s.

China embarked on a 'develop the west' campaign in 1999. Policies in the 1980s focused on developing the eastern coast while the western interior should prepare for future development. After the coastal development strategy of Deng Xiaoping, the PRC began to turn its attention to rural poverty much of which was located in the interior. In June 1999, Sec. Jiang Zemin formally opened the western development strategy at CCP and government meetings. This policy elaborates on Deng Xiaoping's coastal program by turning to regional inequalities in the west.

Reasons for the new 'develop the west' campaign focus on reducing regional inequality. In the 1990s, the interior regions began to be discontent with the siphoning off of resources, human and natural, to coastal development. Lack of economic growth in the west meant underdevelopment - in turn leading to social instabilities.

For western regions that have areas characterized by poverty and a larger percentage of minority population in the ethnic makeup, there is a potential for political instability as well as social instability. So the basic formula of development leading to stability is one that is followed in China.

Under the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), the PRC commanded a great restructuring of the area. That restructuring occurred through many different programs. Their focus has been an orientation of Xinjiang to Beijing. Historically, Xinjiang's centers of power and activity were in Kashgar, Turpan and Gulja. In modern Xinjiang under the PRC, the centralizing force of the state has meant that Urumqi has become the dominant center in terms of productions, administration, culture, population, and power. For Xinjiang this has meant a re-orientation to Beijing and lessening of the status of Kashgar, Turpan, and Gulja in a hierarchy of power. This re-orientation to China

has created a geography of development. The reconstruction of the development landscape has meant the distribution of productive forces and their concentration in central Xinjiang. As migrants from other portions of China move to Xinjiang, a new development landscape is created which means further directional shift –toward Beijing.

Agriculturally, the hallmark of Xinjiang's development has been the Production and Construction Corps (XPCC). Large amounts of central investments and subsidies were directed to rebuilding the land. At the same time central funds and demobilized troops contributed to the consolidation of central control. Animal husbandry has continued growth but the production policies during the collectivization period hindered the pastoralists. Most disastrous was the formation of agro-herding complexes that plowed up rangelands for grain. Xinjiang has the capacity to be a great meat producer for China. Production gains in agriculture must be understood in the context of reversals in animal husbandry.

Production in industry and agriculture as well as the tertiary sector inscribes an activity region of Xinjiang and smaller sets of regions within Xinjiang. Regions of cultural identification in Xinjiang are constituted through relations between and within ethnic groups. The region is the medium for social interaction; the relationships that link together institutions and people shape that region. Northern Xinjiang has most of the industry and commerce. Substantial numbers of Han and Uyghur along with Kazakh reside here. The focus of the north is found in the industrial municipalities of Urumqi, Karamay, and Shihezi – this is the modern day core of Xinjiang's economy populated mostly by Han. In contrast Southern Xinjiang is more rural, with an agricultural

economy. Much of the population in the south is Uyghur, Kashgar in the south is mostly Uyghur; however there are more Han in the cities now especially in Korla and Aksu.

As the region modernized most of the industrial advancements took place in the core Xinjiang area of Urumqi, Karamay, and Shihezi. The economy is focused on this area. Urumqi was connected to the rest of China by railroad in the 1960s and by 1990 to Kazakhstan. Urumqi and Karamay have the largest values in industrial production. Urumqi is well diversified in industrial output including heavy industry, petrochemicals and textiles. Karamay's industry derives mostly from oil production, besides crude oil and gas production, processing also occurs here. Karamay is connected by pipeline to Urumqi. Districts in the south, such as Aksu and Kashgar, produce mostly for local use (cement, fertilizer, food processing). The railroad was extended to Kashgar in 1999. Processing of the Tarim oil adds to the GDP of Korla in Bayangol; otherwise industrial GDP in southern Xinjiang is not large.

Karamay leads in per capita GDP, because of its oil processing and relatively low population. Urumqi has approximately double the average for Xinjiang. Other leaders include Bayangol, Turpan, and Shihezi. The low points in this economic landscape are Hotan, Kizilsu and Kashgar, all in the south and far from the economic heart of Xinjiang. Urumqi is the major economic center. The traditional centers of Kashgar and Ili fall short, while the traditional center of Turpan has made a bit of a comeback because of oil.

All in all the impact of oil (Karamay, Urumqi and even Bayangol and Turpan) is clear. Refining all of the oil in the XUAR would add to the GDP. For the south having more refineries in Bayangol, Aksu or Turpan would boost local GDP. Urumqi's refineries

take in most of the Tarim and Turpan oil. Most of the oil crews are from Northeastern China, for example Daqing. Thus the oil migrants add their labor force to the local areas.

What is the nature of the development landscape in Xinjiang? Production is up as is GDP per capita. However these two measures show only part of the picture. Much of the rise in GDP is due to the processing extractive products; there is an over reliance on oil to describe a rosy scenario. Much of labor force is still in the agricultural sector. Many basic needs have been met. The difficulty comes with seeing the regional differentiation. There is an underdeveloped south compared with developed north. The historical economic centers of Turpan, Kashgar and Gulja have been superseded by the new modernized economic centers of Urumqi, Shihezi, Karamay, and Korla.

To develop southern Xinjiang along the lines of northern Xinjiang would require significant amounts of capital investment. The ‘develop the west’ campaign would seem on the surface to bring new investment to Xinjiang, but most of those capital and labor flows will be directed to northern rather than southern Xinjiang.

The new policies outlined by the Xinjiang Work Forum have a more detailed plan for Xinjiang’s development prospects. Representatives from the various coastal provinces met with counterparts in Xinjiang earlier this year before the Work Forum to start the planning for these projects. One key aspect is the regional component. Attention is paid to southern Xinjiang. There is also an interesting pairing up of provinces on the east coast with the prefectures of Xinjiang.

Beijing Municipality—No.14 Division (XPCC), Hotan Prefecture—7.26 billion yuan (\$1.06 billion) over the next five years for housing and protected agriculture

Guangdong Province—Tumushuke City of the XPCC's No.3 Division, Kashgar Prefecture—9.6 billion yuan (\$1.41 billion) over the next five years for infrastructure construction and public services

Shenzhen—Kashgar City and Taxkorgan County—supply of financing, technologies, talent and management expertise

Jiangsu Province—No.4 Division and No.7 Division of the XPCC, Yili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture, Kizilsu Kirgiz Autonomous Prefecture—people's livelihoods, education, vocational training and oil pipeline projects

Shanghai Municipality—Kashgar Prefecture—earthquake-resistant housing projects, vocational training and agriculture facilities

Shandong Province—Kashgar Prefecture—earthquake-resistant housing projects and safe drinking water projects

Zhejiang Province—Ala'er City of the No.1 Division of the XPCC, Aksu Prefecture—a total investment of 16.7 billion yuan (\$2.45 billion) over the next 10 years in industries, modern agriculture and social welfare

Liaoning Province—Tacheng Prefecture—180 million yuan (\$26.36 million) as disaster relief for residents affected by the blizzard in 2009, job training and modern agriculture

Henan Province—Hami Prefecture and No.13 Division of the XPCC—orchards, protected agriculture and reconstruction of dilapidated houses

Hebei Province—No.2 Division of the XPCC and Bayingolin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture—an investment 1.8 billion yuan (\$263.62 million) in agricultural technologies, housing, employment and education over the next five years

Shanxi Province—Wujiaqu City of the XPCC's No.6 Division, Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture—coal mining, education and reconstruction in shanty areas

Fujian Province—Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture—investments in the textile industry, social welfare and rural infrastructure

Hunan Province—Turpan Prefecture—affordable housing programs and coal mining

Hubei Province—Bortala Mongol Autonomous Prefecture and No.5 Division of the XPCC—protected agriculture, tourism and education

Anhui Province—Hotan Prefecture—an investment of 1.3 billion yuan (\$190.4 million) over the next five years in protected agriculture and modern industries

Tianjin Municipality—Hotan Prefecture—fruit processing and construction of railways and roads

Heilongjiang Province—No.10 Division of the XPCC and Altay Prefecture—mining, education and job training

Jiangxi Province—Kizilsu Kirgiz Autonomous Prefecture—an investment of 2.07 billion yuan (\$303.16 million) in infrastructure, education and people's livelihoods

Jilin Province—Altay Prefecture—flood prevention projects and people's livelihoods

(Hu Yue, “Hand in Hand,” Beijing Review June 7, 2010, No. 23

<http://www.bjreview.com.cn/business/txt/2010-06/07/>)

Southern Xinjiang then will have connections with Beijing, Guangdong, Shenzhen, Shanghai, Shandong, Zhejiang, Anhui, and Tianjin. This direct pairing may

be useful, yet there are some problems. Take for example Kashgar's pairing with Shenzhen. Shenzhen is a special economic zone administered separately from Guangdong province, Shenzhen has special economic rules compared with the rest of Guangdong. Shenzhen specializes in the factories for the global export market. Shenzhen is to supply financing, technologies, talent and management expertise. While the financing of projects in Kashgar may be useful, talent and technology will not go very far in Kashgar. Shenzhen's economic success has depended on its neighbor Hong Kong for investment and expertise. Kashgar's nearest neighbors are Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan in contrast. There is of course an overseas community of people from Xinjiang that is Uyghur and Han in other countries. Perhaps their expertise and skills could be tapped into. This artificial pairing of East Coast – Xinjiang partners would need to go beyond sister city pairing to be beneficial.

Another interesting part of the plan is that Divisions of the XPCC are also partners. This reflects the economic reality of the Xinjiang- the XPCC forms a major part of Xinjiang's economy. It functions as a separate company. The Xinjiang Production Construction Corps XPCC (Shengchan Jianshe Bingtuan) was established in 1954. The Corps as the other state farm systems was dissolved after the Cultural Revolution in 1975 but was reinstated by 1981. The Corps is still organized along military lines; indeed, the Chinese name Bingtuan identifies the XPCC as an *Army Corps*. The XPCC has developed a vast state farm system as well as factories, hotels, and whole cities. The Corps utilizes migrant Han labor as well as prison labor. The Corps receives substantial support from the state and has been a major element of state control in Xinjiang. In the fifty years of the Corps' existence, it has become a twin to the Xinjiang Uyghur

Autonomous Region government, both twins cast large shadows. Fifty years have past but the Corps numbers 2.5 million members, making it the largest state organization after the People's Liberation Army in China. So the plan provides for east coast provinces to support a Centrally administered entity -- the XPCC.

The types of programs are also of interest. Much of the projects are for material infrastructure. These include housing, agriculture, pipelines, mining, fruit processing, textiles, and modern industries. There are some projects on education and "people's livelihood" which deal more with the human infrastructure. Investment in human infrastructure will have a more beneficial impact than more road construction in the region. The coordination of all these projects will be quite difficult particularly since the experts from the east coast may not be very familiar with local conditions in Xinjiang.

One of the focuses should be on education and literacy for southern Xinjiang. Investment in human as well as natural resources is a key to sustained development. Education though needs to be followed by employment. Education without employment is a short ticket to disastrous development. Another issue is that of language. Would Xinjiang be able to follow a path of bilingualism? Can a Uyghur get ahead in society without also being fluent in Chinese? Can a Han get ahead in society without being fluent in Uyghur? Given the current answers to these questions (probably no and definitely yes) the language of instruction is critical for Xinjiang. The universities in Xinjiang have moved from a bilingual (Chinese and Uyghur) to a monolingual system (only Chinese). This changed has continued in the Xinjiang educational system with ramifications on down through primary school.

Demographic landscape

The demographic landscape of Xinjiang has undergone changes as well. There has been an influx of Han migrants thus changing the ethnic composition of the region. The migrations were regionally selective as well thus changing the distribution of population. Xinjiang ethnic diversity forms a basis for regionalization. With a variety of ethnic groups living in the area, all of their experiences and traditions can be brought to bear on any issue. An understanding of the distribution of the ethnic groups provides clues to the cultural landscape of the area.

Of the 30 different ethnic groups in Xinjiang, thirteen have made Xinjiang their home. The thirteen are Uyghur, Kazak, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tatar, Xibo, Manchu, Mongol, Daur, Han, Hui, Tajik, and Russian. They represent different language groups, religions, and customs. Within Xinjiang's 2008 population of 21.3 million, Uyghur account for 46%, Han 39%, Kazak 7%, and the rest 8%. Within the cities one may see a great variety of ethnic groups, but most of the minority groups live on the periphery. A definite Central Asian component is the population base in the region, particularly outside of the capital Urumqi.

Han migration has filled in many corners of Xinjiang. Much of the migration has focused on the major lines of transport, Urumqi south to Korla, Urumqi west to Shihezi. Kashgar and Gulja have maintained their general ethnic composition. The central portion of Xinjiang has continued to grow with Han migration. In the future, though, Xinjiang sees a problem with water supply, especially in Urumqi. Xinjiang is large but not all of its land can be settled.

When considering the level of development, one also needs to consider the ethnic composition of the population. Xinjiang is about 40% Han. There are higher percentages of Han in the northern corridor in Urumqi, Shihezi and Karamay. The south is mostly Uyghur in contrast. An interesting observation, though, is the relative increase in the Han population in the south. Kizilsu, Kashgar and Aksu have the most relative change in the numbers of Han. Much of this new population is urban, so the effect is even stronger in Kashgar City, Artush City and Aksu City. Modern population settlement and migration patterns have followed the railway. This increase in Han population is probably due to the new railway extended to Kashgar in 1999.

Han populations match up well with urban and transportation linkages, roads and railroads; migrants tend to follow transportation lines. Xinjiang has distinctive nationality concentrations. The cities as well have distinctive ethnic neighborhoods, for example, Uyghur in Urumqi, or Hui in Turpan. Uyghurs live in the south, which is the poorest area. Han live in the wealthier urban corridor of the north

The 2000 census like the 1990 included questions on migration. Respondents were asked if they were registered in other localities. In Xinjiang, over 1.4 million people (7.64%) indicated they were registered elsewhere; I assume most of these were Han or Hui, most likely not Turkic minorities. Not all migration data from the census has been released. The registrants came from all over China, primarily from the Southwest, North, and Northwest. Major sources for the registrants are Sichuan, Henan, and Gansu. The Sichuan migrants (over 400,000) are well known in Xinjiang, witness the large number of Sichuan restaurants. Sichuanese have been coming to Xinjiang since the 1950s. There are many registrants who have come to Xinjiang from the Three Gorges area. The Henan

people coming to Xinjiang are Yellow River people. There are many ties from the north China Plain to Xinjiang going back to the 1950s. The Gansu people are true north westerners who have moved along the Hexi corridor into Xinjiang. These migrants are working in industry and agriculture, in oil and in cotton, in households and in government, as cadres and as maids. Like any immigrant group they are seeking a better life, in this case primarily economic life. Xinjiang is a very different place from Sichuan or Henan, not so different from Gansu. Migrants are aided and recruited. There are centers in Urumqi, Korla and other major cities to facilitate the flow of the migrants for jobs and housing. Or recruiters, whose original home is in Sichuan, go back to Sichuan to bring labor to Urumqi. Since there is a surplus of labor in Sichuan, since the people speak the same dialect, since jobs are scarce in Sichuan and the population is large, why not go to Xinjiang for a time to make some money?

What is the nature of the demographic landscape in Xinjiang? The population is concentrated in two segments, Northern Xinjiang and Southern Xinjiang. In both cases the roads and now railroads linking the settlements have proved to be the major paths for migration. The population has a male/female ratio comparable with the rest of China, the Uyghur have a lower male/female ratio than the Han. Xinjiang's age profile is younger than other parts of China; southern Xinjiang is particularly young. In terms of nationality (*minzu /millet*) the Uyghur are still in the south and the Kazak are in the north. The Han are migrating in a steady stream into the central area and following paths of migration to the other urban centers. Major sources of migrants are from Sichuan, Henan, and Gansu.

What direction does this young, ethnically diverse population with large numbers of migrants take? If the border were open to cross border migration, some Kazakhs might

move to Kazakhstan or Uyghurs to Central Asia. But there is no Uyghur land across the border. Indeed if the border were open there might well be many Han in Kazakhstan and Central Asia rather than the few who are there now. South to Pakistan, north to Russia and Mongolia does not seem readily possible, although the local connections to these neighboring countries are strong. Given economic tendencies Han migrants are looking not to Xinjiang but to Shanghai, Hong Kong, Beijing, and further afield to US, Canada, Australia or Europe. 50-60 million Han live outside of the country as *huaqiao* overseas Chinese.

Looking across the border to Kazakhstan, one sees a similar situation a young ethnic diverse population, with a large number of migrants from Russia rather than China. Of course, since 1990 the political situation is now quite different.

Xinjiang's demographics show a population that is getting older little by little and more urban. The demographic trends also show a population that is becoming less ethnically diverse with more migrants. That is the future of Xinjiang's demography.

Xinjiang has certainly prospered materially. I first studied in Urumqi in 1985; since then cell phones, cable TV, computers, and 20-story buildings are commonplace. There has been a technological growth. Transportation improvements air, rail, and highways connect the region together, focusing on Urumqi. Now all taxicabs in Urumqi have Global Positioning Systems.

Han hold many of the technological and jobs in Xinjiang. A higher percentage of Uyghurs have advanced education than in the past, but to get a good job is not so easy in Xinjiang, to do so one needs connections or *guanxi*. Tapping onto the network of connections one relies on government, university, family, kith and kin. Connections for

Han are more forthcoming than for Uyghur. Of course a well-connected highly educated Uyghur has more chance than a poor Han peasant from Hunan. A well-qualified individual has a better chance among his or her own ethnic group. Han migrants have contributed greatly to the economic development of the region but not necessarily to the local inhabitants of Xinjiang. Those who have worked in technical fields training local Uyghur and Kazakh population have also contributed to the social development of the region and its inhabitants.

The plans for development in Xinjiang place a great deal of emphasis on physical infrastructure (roads and railways). For example, World Bank loans were previously used for improving the highway between Urumqi and Turpan, between Kuitun and Sayram Lake. In contrast the Tarim Basin Project is aimed at poor farmers in the south. China also has a World Bank Project aimed at education among indigenous peoples in Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou. This is a good example of a project that could be adapted to southern Xinjiang.

The new policies outlined by the Xinjiang Work Forum will also have a considerable impact on the local demography. Often times with work projects in China, the skilled workers move into the areas. So many of the jobs in the new infrastructure projects would go to people with experience in those fields. This would entail more people migrating from eastern China to Xinjiang. And since the projects would go deep into southern Xinjiang, there will be more migration of Han into the traditionally Uyghur populated areas of southern Xinjiang. Usually the supervisors and foremen at job sites would be Han and prefer have a work force that operates in the Chinese language. So it is more difficult for a Uyghur to get hired in this formal sector of the economy. This

Xinjiang development program could lead into an east-west population transfer across China.

The resultant impact of the development program on the demographic character of Xinjiang lies in two areas: the combination of ethnicity and migration. The development program will entail a movement of population from the east. Prior migrations from the east have been directly organized by the center. The major migration of Han into the region occurred during the 1950s. Many soldiers as well as peasants and urban dwellers settled in the region. In some cases, demobilized soldiers formed the new Production and Construction Corps. Oftentimes this settlement extended into land that was used for pastureland, converting it to agricultural purposes. Or new patches of 'desert' were converted by tapping into the local aquifer (such land could only be used for a few years before nature would reclaim it). Many from as far as Shanghai came, as well as Sichuan and Hunan, in addition to the traditional flow of migrants from Gansu and Shaanxi. Migration slowed in the 1970s as the political situation stabilized.

In the 1990s a new element began to appear -- the floating population. China has about 100 million people that can be classified as floating population. We do not know how many there are in Xinjiang. These could also be described as temporary or circular migrants, in that they do not move permanently but could constitute an extra 10% of any urban population. In Urumqi, the temporary migrants can be seen at the train station, emerging from the 3-4 day journey. There is a large enclave of the temporary migrants living near the train station. Downtown, there is an office for the temporary residents where they can line up jobs and get housing. A stroll by this area and a discussion with the migrants shows that many of them are looking for construction or other skilled labor

jobs. The better skilled can command 2000 yuan per month. Similar facilities are available in Korla and Aksu. So there is a provision for the temporary migrants even though a permanent move may not be in the future for them. Many would only plan to stay a while to try their luck in the city. This new development program would bring more formal migrants as well as floating population into Xinjiang. Most of the migrants had been heading toward the central areas of Urumqi and Shihezi. Now there will be more migrants headed toward Kashgar and southern Xinjiang. The vast majority of these migrants will be Han. Thus the cultural character of southern Xinjiang will change from one predominantly Uyghur to one with a larger Han component.

Finally, what are the prospects for population growth? Population growth continues in Xinjiang, as does the migration to the region from other parts of China. If anything, the migration seems to be increasing in recent years, particularly with the addition of the floating population. This migration will ensure a larger percentage of Han in the region. The focus for the Han population will continue to be northern and central Xinjiang around Urumqi. With the completion of the railway to Kashgar, migration flows into southern Xinjiang will continue. Already the Han proportion of the population in southern Xinjiang has begun to increase. The only real limit to population growth in the region is access to water not access to land. The state has decided to tap into local aquifers and is using that water for agricultural expansion, oil production, construction and industry and residential use. In the oases of southern Xinjiang, overexploitation of water points to a serious ecological disaster in the making.