

# Looking into the Sky: Hope for Han-Uyghur Reconciliation

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## Abstract

The Uyghur people endure tremendous oppression. The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians 2, provides a framework for understanding both the cause and the solution to the Uyghur's oppression. One key event, the Urumqi riots of July 2009, significantly helps illuminate the Uyghurs' current situation, giving clarifying insight into mistreatment of the Uyghurs. Many of the underlying assumptions and stereotypes in the background of this event shape how Uyghurs have consistently been deprecated by the Han. Powerful personal testimonies demonstrate the pain of the Uyghurs and also highlight sacrificial—even persecution-invoking—steps Han Chinese Christians should take to love their Uyghur neighbors, ultimately, to achieve Han-Uyghur reconciliation.

**Key Words:** genocide, reconciliation, Urumqi, Uyghur, Xinjiang

## Tale of Two Riots

“...the city was filled with...confusion, and they rushed together..., dragging with them ...Paul's companions in travel. ...for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’” Acts 19:29, 34 ESV.

The description in Acts 19 introduces the “outcast” in Ephesians 2:11: unbelieving, pagan-god-worshiping Gentiles that, at least in the case of Acts 19, start riots. Paul does not criminalize these people, but rather, has compassion on them as he encourages the Christians in Ephesus to remember where they came from and what kind of life they had before being introduced to Jesus. Meaningful similarities exist between the Acts 19 riot and the 2009 riots in Urumqi, the capital city of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in northwestern China. Moreover, Paul's response to the rioting Ephesians holds vital relevance for Christians responding to the Uyghurs.

Ephesians 2:11-12 reads, “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”

The theological foundation Paul lays in Ephesians 2:11-12 explains what it was like for Gentiles who existed apart from the special covenant community of Old Covenant Israel. Paul elaborates by pointing out how the Gentiles were socially ostracized by Israel, separated from Israel's spiritual blessings, and covenantal strangers to Israel and their God. These ways in which Gentiles were excluded shed light on the Uyghur people, especially as they relate to Han Chinese in China. This scripture passage parallels the current state of Han-Uyghur relations, but it also looks forward to the kind of reconciliation that is possible in Ephesians 2:13-22.

## Overview

The Uyghur people have experienced tremendous oppression for more than 70 years due to their ethnicity. Many of the underlying stereotypes in the background of the Urumqi riots of July 2009

have shaped how the Han treat Uyghurs over the last century, and further, have been fodder for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to provoke Han hatred toward the Uyghurs. Additionally, several circumstances led to the Urumqi riots and subsequent killings, illuminating the overall Uyghur situation. Finally, powerful personal testimonies demonstrate the pain of being Uyghur and also provide vision for Han Christians to sacrificially love their Uyghur neighbors, including even to enter into their persecution, and be truly set apart from the prevailing, Uyghur-deprecating culture of the Han.

### **Stereotypes Held by the Han Chinese People and Government toward the Uyghurs**

Across the world, whenever there is extensive oppression of one people group, there are almost always systemic reasons. At the root of systemic discrimination are assumptions and stereotypes that drive unjust treatment of the marginalized (Anyabwile 2015; Cole 2020; Crossman 2019; Longley 2022).

Marco Cinnirella, in “Ethnic and National Stereotypes: A Social Identity Perspective,” a chapter in C. Barfoot’s 1997 volume *Beyond Pug’s Tour*, contributes the following:

...stereotypes are belief systems which associate attitudes, behaviors and personality characteristics with members of a particular social category or group. They may include ‘active stereotypes’ (circulating in society and endorsed by particular groups) and ‘dormant stereotypes’ (indirectly disseminated via the mass media)... Where individuals have not ‘shared’ stereotypes with their peers, they often rely exclusively on dormant stereotypes, internalizing mass-mediated images that later come to influence face-to-face interactions. In extreme cases, social stereotypes can [Barfoot adds] ‘numb our consciences and tempt us to succumb to violent and destructive impulses’ (Finley 2013, 82).

Clearly Han Chinese hold such stereotypes regarding the Uyghurs.

The Han people and the CCP judge that the Uyghur way of life is “feudal.” Over the years of ongoing Han occupation of Xinjiang (Urumqi in particular), Han people, along with Han policy makers, have developed assumptions about the Uyghur people as they compare Uyghur culture to Han ways and customs. As these comparisons have become more defined and repeated, one of the primary judgments of the Han that has surfaced toward the Uyghurs is that Uyghurs are backward, lazy, and too traditional. Rudelson puts it like this: “Among Hans, particularly those in Urumqi, ‘feudal’ is the Chinese equivalent of a curse and a pervasive conceptual category; it is comparable to such a negatively charged Western term as primitive, fanatical, and backward. Hans use the word ‘feudal’ to dismiss something *without critical evaluation*” (Rudelson 1997, 124, emphasis added).

*Without critical evaluation* is the key phrase here. Based on Rudelson, three broad categories capture the summary of the presumptuous evaluation of the Uyghurs by the Han: sex, Islam, and alcoholism. In Urumqi, Han men have often lamented the fact that Uyghur women—despite often being forced to do so because of genocide and “ethnic cleansing”—are unwilling to marry them (New 2017). They see this unwillingness as an archaic aspect of Islam. The situation is particularly difficult for Han men to accept because, according to Chinese lore, Uyghur women are seen as the most beautiful. Furthermore, Han men themselves believe that Uyghur women actually prefer Han men to Uyghur men because Han men do not drink heavily or beat their wives (Rudelson 1997). Also, the Han Chinese do not understand the religious reasons for why the Uyghurs abstain from

eating pork. Again, all of the particular beliefs about Uyghur women's sex and marriage preferences, Uyghur alcoholism, and Uyghur abstaining from pork held by the Han constitute an attitude toward the Uyghurs that assumes they are feudal and beneath the "superior" Han culture. The Han attitude that the Uyghur are inferior actually fueled much of the struggle with alcoholism that has existed among mostly young Uyghur men. Again, Rudelson offers the following analysis:

The prevalence of these pejorative attitudes in Urumqi and throughout China undermines individual Uyghurs' self-worth and results in internalization of self-doubt and swallowed anger that occasionally becomes explosive... [I]ncrease in alcohol consumption among male Uyghurs is directly related to their marginalized sense of self-worth... (Rudelson 1997, 125).

Negative Han stereotypes about the Uyghurs contribute to a Uyghur backlash against the Han—understandably so. A joke that is often told by Uyghurs illustrates that point:

There was an American, a Japanese, a Uyghur, and a Han Chinese on a train. The American had cash overflowing from all the pockets of his clothes. He said, 'I have way too much money. I don't need all this money,' so he threw some out of the window. The Japanese guy had dozens of valuable Rolex watches on each arm. He said, 'I have too many watches. I don't need all these watches,' so he threw half of them out the window. Then the Uyghur guy said, 'We have too many Han Chinese people in the world. We don't need any more,' so he threw the Han Chinese man out the window of the train (Longtime 2009).

That there is significant Uyghur resentment toward Han Chinese should come as no surprise. The Uyghur's bitterness comes from the pain of continually being labeled as inferior by the Han. The CCP has greatly encouraged the overarching Han belief that the Uyghurs are "feudal," leading to assumptions that the Uyghurs are, in almost every aspect of life, inferior. The correlating Uyghur heartache emanates from a portion of a poem written by a Uyghur called, "We Can't Look into the Sky":

The sky is far, so far from us,  
 Desires are wet,  
 Misery hasn't gone yet,  
 We can't raise our head.  
 The sky is near, so near to our soul,  
 to the flowing blood  
 deep inside deep in our heart (H. n.d.).

### **July 2009 Urumqi Riots and Causes**

In July 2009, violence erupted on the streets of Urumqi. Vehicles were burned, and hundreds of people—Han and Uyghur—were killed. Many locals in Urumqi, both Han and Uyghur, describe this event as the turning point of the unjust treatment the Uyghurs have received for the last seven decades: Before the riots of 2009 the Uyghurs hated the Chinese, but the Chinese basically ignored the Uyghur. After the riots, the Uyghurs hated the Chinese and the Chinese hated the Uyghurs. More generally, in the minds of many Han Chinese and Uyghurs the July 2009 riots in Urumqi were a watershed moment.

What was the cause (or causes) of the July 2009 violence in Urumqi? How might all Christians, especially Han Christians, understand the event in light of Ephesians 2:11-12? And what can the global Church learn from wrestling with these and other related questions?

Most of the scholarship agrees that the riots were inevitable and identifies seven causes.

*Cause 1: Economic Development Injustice*

Over the years of ongoing Chinese occupation of the Xinjiang Province, the CCP has deployed various projects for the economic development of Xinjiang. However, the Uyghurs never see these developments as benefitting them but rather as a means to motivate more Han Chinese to move to the area, diluting Uyghur culture (Halliday 2013).

*Cause 2: Employment Discrimination*

With this Han influx, the CCP has favored placing the Han Chinese in any new and available jobs, not the Uyghurs (Halliday 2013). Even if this situation has improved in recent years the damage has been done; the Uyghur do not feel valued or needed in their own homeland. And whatever improvement is meaningless now given the ongoing genocide since 2016 (Halliday 2013).

*Cause 3: Discrimination in Xinjiang's Education System*

In the recent past, the formal education of the Uyghur community involved a difficult decision for every Uyghur student (Halliday 2013). *Minkaohan* are Uyghurs who chose to be educated in all-Mandarin classes for better job opportunities for their future in China. However, this decision excluded them from learning Uyghur heritage and culture like the *Minkaomin*, who stayed more directly connected to their Uyghur roots but sacrificed key job placement opportunities. This educational-economic system devalued Uyghur culture in that only Uyghurs willing to sacrifice learning about their heritage obtained better jobs. Moreover, this discriminatory system caused internal divisions in the Uyghur community, as many *Minkaomin* saw *Minkaohan* as sellouts. Furthermore, the CCP was given more motivation to practice job placement discrimination. It is important to note as well that presently there is no option to be educated in the Uyghur language. All Uyghur children are forced to be educated in Mandarin (Li 2019).

*Cause 4: Religious Discrimination and Restrictions*

Up to the time of the July 2009 riots the CCP had continually tightened its grip on the religious practice of Uyghurs. They allowed no outward expressions of faith in public work places or in private businesses (Halliday 2013). The CCP's motive in the restrictions was to suppress the possibility of Islamic extremism. Interestingly, even greater levels of restrictions on Islam exist now; many Uyghur mosques have been demolished or converted for another purpose (Moritsugu and Kang 2021).

*Cause 5: The Ongoing "Strike Hard" Campaign*

For the CCP the point of the "Strike Hard" campaign was to fight crime and terrorism. However, the effect it had on minorities, in particular Uyghurs, has furthered injustices, giving Han people excuses to profile Uyghurs as criminals (Halliday 2013).

*Cause 6: Massive Shift in Population of Han People in Xinjiang*

In 1949, Xinjiang had only a 7% Han Chinese population. By 2008, the population of Han Chinese had grown to a staggering 41% (Halliday 2013). This fact underscores the amount of jobs Han Chinese people have been getting in Xinjiang and how very few of those jobs have been going to the Uyghurs, formerly the majority ethnic group in that region.

*Cause 7: Violent Event at the Xuri Toy Factory, Shaoguan, Guangdong*

Six Uyghur men were falsely accused of raping a Han woman in the living quarters of the Xuri Toy Factory. After this false accusation, a huge fight broke out at the factory. Many of the Han Chinese workers ganged up on the Uyghur men. Official reports said that two Uyghur men died, but later eyewitnesses reported that several Uyghur men lost their lives in the brawl. Video cameras captured the fight, and the coverage went viral in Urumqi shortly after the attack. Indignation over the fight led to protests that eventually turned violent (Halliday 2013).

What compounded the anger and injustice felt by the Uyghur in this event was not just the killing of the Uyghur men but the fact that the Han workers reacted against the Uyghur without evidence that they did anything wrong. This reaction highlights the stereotypes and racial discrimination against the Uyghur people.

In sum, injustice in economic development, employment, education, religious expression, and the “Strike Hard” campaign, along with population shift and the events at the Xuri Toy Factory, all caused the riots of July 2009. Underlying racism against the Uyghurs clearly exists, but what are the underlying assumptions or stereotypes that have lead to such discriminatory policies?

**Ephesians 2:11-12**

Paul’s words in Ephesians 2:11-12 shed light on assumptions and stereotypes that have fed racism and discriminatory practices against the Uyghurs. The passage reads, “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles...were... separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”

The Uyghurs are the “alienated,” the “strangers,” in their own homeland. Just as Paul writes about how the Gentiles were socially ostracized by Israel, and strangers to Israel’s God, and thus strangers to his covenant blessings, by comparison the Uyghurs are alienated and made strangers in their own homeland. They are the dispossessed.

What become of us?  
 Distance is soaking wet,  
 Eyes are complete blank  
 That’s why we can’t bend our head.  
 Are you the crescent? Is that your smile?  
 Did you come to guide the dawn?  
 Or do your eyes like ours  
 full of frown?  
 Don’t look at us with distant fail  
 Your gaze is a fairy tale.  
 Please cry so that the drops  
 let us know there are still hopes.  
 We can’t look into the sky (H. n.d.).

## **The Stories and Voices of Uyghur People—and Hope**

Three personal Uyghur stories serve to underscore the current situation and how devastating July 2009 was in Urumqi.

### *A Han Play*

Twenty years before Urumqi 2009, a play produced by Han Chinese celebrated the life of a particular Han person that purportedly helped the Uyghur tremendously in a small, poor town on the south side of XUAR. The play's actors were all Han Chinese people. They depicted a Han man who came to this town to become a teacher for Uyghur kids. Han Chinese people dressed up like Uyghurs and made their faces look like them. The Han man was praised as the savior of the town by the "Uyghur" people, and in the end, he died, and was basically sainted by the "Uyghur" people in the play. This depiction of an external "savior" of ostensibly less fortunate people is comparable to Jim Crow and his black face plays in the U.S-American South (Pilgrim 2012). While these caricatures may not be ill-intended, they can be incredibly painful and belittling (Longtime 2009).

### *Han Won't Learn Uyghurche*

Throughout the years, both foreigners and Han Chinese settled among the Uyghurs in XUAR. Former XUAR expatriates explained that their Uyghur friends would ask them, "How is it that you foreigners have been here for such a short amount of time yet have learned to speak our language so well, but these Han Chinese who have been here forever can't even say one d- word!?" This question expresses how immensely devalued the Uyghurs feel living in their own land while having to share it with the Han. The Han expect the Uyghurs to learn Mandarin but rarely make an effort to learn Uyghurche, the Uyghur language (Longtime 2009).

### *Hostility from Cab Driver*

A personal conversation between the author (Ari Kin) and a Uyghur XUAN resident highlights the racial wounds from Urumqi July 2009. After the riots happened, the Uyghur man came to Urumqi from Kashgar. He took a taxi from the airport to his family's house in Urumqi. The man spoke excellent Mandarin and was wearing a mask, so the cab driver (who was Han) did not know he was Uyghur. As the cab pulled up to the house, the man started speaking some Uyghur to people waiting outside for him. Immediately, the cab driver said to him, "What!? You're Uyghur? Had I known you were Uyghur I would have taken you to a place where I could have gotten rid of you!"

These three stories give insight into how much work still needs to be done in areas of racial reconciliation. However, two additional stories provide a ray of light searing through the devastation: Han Chinese Christians have begun to apply Ephesians 2:11-22. As the Han Chinese church leads the way, they will powerfully bring hope to the Uyghurs, hope that is only possible through the humility and justice the gospel brings.

### *"That's a Good Man"*

The following event contrasts beautifully with the previous stories. A certain Uyghur man from Urumqi who was a nominal Christian had an ugly drinking habit. In his drunken state, he would ramble to the Uyghurs with him about Jesus. One night, his "evangelism" hotly angered a group of Uyghur men and they started beating him. It was a Han Chinese man who came to his rescue and influenced the other Uyghur men to stop beating him. His injuries required hospitalization but no Uyghur cab driver would take him; only a Han driver was willing to take him. Subsequently,

this same Uyghur man had many dreams about Jesus. In one of these dreams, as Jesus walked next to him, they came upon an American and Jesus said, “See that American man? That’s a good man.” Then they came upon a Japanese man, and again Jesus said, “See that Japanese man? That’s a good man.” Then they came upon a Han Chinese man, and Jesus said, “See that Han Chinese man? That’s a good man.”

Accordingly, while Han Chinese people do bear much of the burden of reconciliation with the Uyghur, this beautiful story shows that God is also working powerfully behind the scenes, preparing the marginalized Uyghurs eventually to forgive.

### *Han Christians’ Love*

One final story demonstrates courageous, sacrificial, and unconditional love by Han Chinese Christians. After July 2009, some Han believers in Urumqi caught the vision to love their Uyghur neighbors. These believers actually moved to the southern Uyghur part of the city in spite of the fact that many Han pastors were telling their congregations to stay away from the south side and its conflicts. These Han wanted to love their neighbor out of obedience to Christ and were willing to override their pastors’ concerns to do so. When Uyghurs needed to go to the northern Han part of Urumqi for various reasons, these Han believers took it upon themselves to escort the Uyghurs, to shield and protect them and ensure they got there and back safely. One of these Han believers developed a close friendship with a Uyghur man whom he had helped. This Uyghur man invited his Han friend to go to his hometown and meet his family. Even though the men were good friends, the Uyghur’s family did not like the Han friend and did not receive him well at all. The Uyghur family did not accept him and would not do anything nice for him; they hated him.

These Christ-honoring Han are beginning to understand the problem. As more Han understand, then, through a growing humility, the Han Church can take further steps towards applying Ephesians 2:13-22 for the great purpose of reconciliation with the Uyghurs for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ...So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God... (Ephesians 2:13-14,19).

God’s grace is moving people to take righteous risks, yet this kind of work, especially involving racial pain, can be thankless. However, the love that God gives through Christ is the power Christians have to persevere in good works through suffering. The ability to love people sacrificially without needing to be thanked or acknowledged is a mark of true maturity, walking in the good works God has prepared (Eph. 2:10). While the wounds of the Uyghur people are very deep, the Han also have pain from their treatment by Uyghurs. As a result, for our Han brothers and sisters, living an Ephesians 2:11-22 life in front of Uyghurs will not be easy. The fruit may take a long time to develop. But the pursuit is immeasurably worthwhile. God’s glory and strength will sustain his people as they move out into a broken world. Moreover, our Uyghur friends will see God’s glory on display through the selfless, unconditional, holy—set apart, different—love of his Church.

### **Conclusion**

The riots in Ephesus resulted from the advance of the gospel. The riots centuries later in Urumqi resulted from injustice. Because people outside of Christ do not have the indwelling Holy Spirit to guide their response to evil against them, it is no surprise that the Ephesians of Acts 19 behaved as they did. Notwithstanding, Paul had compassion on the rioters in Ephesus, even though they were not victims of injustice but merely sinners who were resistant to the gospel. How much more then should Christians worldwide—including Han—have compassion on Uyghurs, the victims of severe injustice? Han Christians' compassion will surely subject them to persecution under the CCP. But obedience to Jesus Christ is radically worth the risk. Acts 9:15-16 states Paul's dual call clearly: to preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles and also suffer for Christ's sake. Will Han brothers and sisters answer the call? Will Han brothers and sisters tenaciously believe Jesus's words in Matthew 5:11-12, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you...rejoice and be glad"? At this moment, as a result of ongoing mass imprisonment, every single Uyghur on the face of the planet is hurting. Every... single... one.

We can't count the days,  
 Prayers fell from the tongues,  
 Pick them up, oh poor songs,  
 We can't follow your croon,  
 We can't distinguish the crescent  
 or even the full moon  
 from the deepening gloom.  
 Have all the cocks been slaughtered?  
 Why by the sun aren't we brightened?  
 Do you have the crescent of today?  
 We can't ask at the expense  
 of our lives to pay.  
 Try to gather all the griefs,  
 that's how parting tastes.  
 We can't look into the sky... (H. n.d.).

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