MEMBER PROFILE

EAST TURKESTAN

World Uyghur Congress

UNREPRESENTED NATIONS & PEOPLES ORGANIZATION
unpo.org

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**Status:** Autonomous Region

**Population:** 19,250,000

**Area:** 1.6 million km²

**Capital City:** Urumqi

**Language:** Uyghur. The official language is Chinese.

**Religion:** Islam

**Ethnic Groups:** Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tatar, Salar, Tajik, Mongol, Hui, Manchu, Xibe, Dagur, Russian, Chinese

**OVERVIEW**

East Turkestan is a large, sparsely populated area, covering 1.6 million km². It accounts for more than one-sixth of China’s total territory and a quarter of its boundary length. Located in Central Asia, it is bordered by Russia in the north, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the west, Afghanistan to the southwest, Pakistan, India and Tibet to the south, China to the east and Mongolia to the northeast.

The name “Turkestan” is Iranian in origin, meaning “land of the Turkic peoples” and dates back to the 5th century. The western part of Turkestan was gradually conquered by the Tsarist Russia in 1865, after which it became known as Western Turkestan. After the formation of the Soviet Union in 1924, the Western Turkestan was divided into five republics: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The eastern part of Turkestan had been invaded by the Manchu rulers of China in 1876 and was named East Turkestan. It is the cradle of Uyghur history, culture and civilization.

The number of people living in East Turkestan is a matter of considerable debate. No satisfactory population census has ever been made. According to the latest Chinese census the present population of East Turkestan is slightly over 19 million, of which Uyghurs make up 9 million. Uyghurs, however, dispute these figures claiming the Uyghur population to be around 20 million.

**UNPO MEMBER REPRESENTATION**

East Turkestan is represented at the UNPO by the World Uyghur Congress (WUC). They were a founding member of UNPO in 1991.

The World Uyghur Congress (WUC) is the major international body that represents Uyghurs living at home and abroad. It is officially registered under the law of the Federal Republic of Germany. The permanent General Secretariat of the WUC is in Munich, Germany and the current President is Ms. Rebiya Kadeer.

The stated objectives of the World Uyghur Congress are to promote democracy, human rights and freedom for the Uyghur people using peaceful, nonviolent, and democratic means such as collaborative dialogue to determine their political future. The WUC promotes the adherence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and democratic pluralism. Above all, freedom of religion, freedom of media and expression and freedom of person are viewed as absolute and non-negotiable rights owed to every citizen, regardless of ethnicity.
POLITICAL SITUATION

Although East Turkestan is called “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” there is no self-rule or self-government for the Uyghurs. More than 90% of all important political, administrative and economic bodies in East Turkestan are occupied by Chinese employees. The same over representation of Chinese is in evidence in the Regional Communist Party Central Committee and the Peoples Regional Government. Several seemingly important positions have been given to Uyghurs, but their authority is consistently undermined. Chinese “Divide and Rule” policies have divided the indigenous peoples of East Turkestan, such as the Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Tatars into separate provinces, counties, and townships.

CURRENT ISSUES

Population Policies

In order to completely assimilate East Turkestan into China, millions of Chinese are being settled in the region. Before 1949 there were only 300,000 Chinese in East Turkestan. According to the Chinese statistics now it is 7 million.

Almost 250,000 Chinese have been settled in East Turkestan every year, and contrary to the “one child” policy in existence until recently across mainland China, Chinese settlers in East Turkestan are allowed to have more children. At the same time, coercive birth control is being carried out among the Uyghur women to restrain the growth of Uyghur population. Chinese officials have recently started offering financial incentives for inter-ethnic marriages between Chinese, Uyghur and other minorities. Mixed race couples would be granted privileged access to medical treatment, housing and education for their children. Such policy is meant to undermine Uyghur identity and culture in order to further assimilate those that do not conform to Chinese culture. The assimilation policy also aims to marginalize the Uyghur language and religion. Uyghurs with little or no knowledge of Mandarin are excluded from certain jobs with an ever-increasing number of Han Chinese settling in East Turkestan.

Arrests

According to Amnesty International, in the year of 1997 alone, more than 100,000 Uyghurs were arrested throughout the country. Between January and June 1998, hundreds of Uyghurs were detained under suspicion of planning “separatist” activities. Since 11 September 2001, Chinese authorities have intensified the arrests of Uyghurs. In 2005 alone, around 18,000 Uyghurs were arrested and accused of being “separatists”, “religious extremists” and “terrorists”, according to Reuters.

Since the July 2009 incident, Chinese authorities have arrested thousands of people and a high number of Uyghurs have been forcibly disappeared. Detained Uyghurs have undergone unfair trials, lacking in transparency, independence and guaranteed due process rights. Throughout 2014 and 2015, there have been frequent incidents of violence, discriminatory detentions and searches of Uyghurs, particularly students and activists. The Chinese Government has conducted nation-wide sweeps, security checks, and detentions carried out by armed security forces, specifically targeting Uyghurs and inciting clashes.

Torture

The first half of 2014 saw a sharp rise in violence as a result of growing social inequality and oppression. When in detention, Uyghurs are regularly subjected to torture. After visiting detention centers in East Turkestan, Tibet and Beijing, Dr. Manfred Novak, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture, stated that “torture in China is still wide-spread” and groups including Uyghurs and Tibetans “have been targets of torture”. A U.N. statement later said
that over the years Chinese authorities have used electric shock batons, whips, hoods or blindfolds, needles and hot oil to torture prisoners alongside other forms of torture, such as sleep deprivation, water submersion and bodily mutilation.

**Execution and Extra-Judicial Killings**

The death penalty is extensively used in East Turkestan and the number of death sentences imposed is significantly higher than in the rest of China. Many of those executed have been victims of extra-judicial executions or deliberate killings. According to a CNN report, 1,000 Uyghurs have been executed in East Turkestan in 1997 alone. Between January and September 1998, 55 Uyghurs were executed.

Following 11 September 2001, more than 200 Uyghurs were executed on political grounds, while 50 Uyghurs were sentenced to death for so-called “separatist” and “terrorist” activities. According to Reuters and AFP on 17 August 2004, four more Uyghurs were executed. The mass executions that took place in the month of May and June 2014 have caused growing concerns about the lack of justice, due process, and legal guarantees for defendants with Uyghur names. WUC believes that since January 2010, China has secretly sentenced more Uyghurs to death in connection with the July 2009 incidents in Urumqi.

The most recent death sentences have been implemented quickly and effectively with no chance for appeal or external scrutiny. There has been no evidence that the suspects were provided any kind of legal defense.

**Enforced Disappearances**

Another pressing issue that Uyghurs face in China is the practice of enforced disappearances. The overall situation in East Turkestan deteriorated in the wake of the turbulent unrest in the region, following July 2009 clashes. In its aftermath, hundreds of Uyghurs were arrested and held incommunicado, reinforcing a growing trend of forcibly disappearing people, providing no indication of their whereabouts. Families and friends are unable to locate their loved-one as authorities refuse to confirm their detention or death. In addition, the practice of organ harvesting is considered to be closely linked to enforced disappearances in China, primarily targeting Uyghurs and the Falun Gong, especially in cases of political prisoners.

**Refugees**

Uyghurs who attempt to flee the repression in East Turkestan are at extreme risk of being deported back. Uyghur refugees and asylum seekers have been forcibly deported from neighbouring countries that have strong diplomatic and trade ties to China. According to the World Uyghur Congress, upon their return to China, many are detained, tortured, sentenced to death or disappeared. Forced deportations have also occurred from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma and Laos in recent years.
As Cambodia forcibly deported 20 Uyghur asylum-seekers including a woman and children to China in December 2009, the Chinese government labeled these Uyghurs as “criminals”. The Chinese authorities refused to reveal the conditions, whereabouts, and legal status of the returnees, despite calls to do so from human rights organizations and the United Nations. Prior to 2011, Uyghurs were repatriated from several states, such as Cambodia, Laos, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Burma and Nepal. In May 2011, Ershidin Israil was forcibly deported from Kazakhstan despite having an offer to settle in Sweden. In August 2011, Thailand repatriated one, Pakistan deported five Uyghurs, including a woman and two children, and Malaysia deported eleven Uyghurs. In November 2014, at a UN meeting in New York, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that Turkey had taken the steps to receive the refugees from Thailand, though there has been no definite action taken. In 2015, Thailand deported 100 Uyghurs, drawing international attention and condemnation from the UN, US and EU.

A Human Rights Watch press release states that “Uighurs disappear into a black hole after being deported to China.” It continues by elaborating that “China appears to be conducting a concerted campaign to identify and press for the return of Uighurs from countries throughout Asia”.

**Freedom of Religion**

The Chinese government is directly implementing a campaign of religious repression against the Muslim Uyghurs. According to a report released by Human Rights Watch in 2005, “the world-wide campaign against terrorism has given Beijing the perfect excuse to crack down harder than ever in East Turkestan. Other Chinese enjoy a growing freedom of worship, but Uyghurs like Tibetans, find that their religion is being used as a tool of control.” According to the WUC, ever-more intrusive controls have been adopted, including surveillance of mosques and the screening of materials produced by religious leaders. Most recently, Chinese authorities have tightened curbs on Uyghurs, banning any government official, state employees, Party members, children, and in some cases women from entering the mosques. At present, the number of mosques in East Turkestan is not sufficient to meet the needs of local Muslims, however, the building of new mosques has been prohibited. There are no private religious schools and private religious instruction is banned. There is a shortage of well-educated clerics, Korans and Islamic publications.

Government control of religious activity has even reached the private sphere. Uyghur youths are prohibited from praying or fasting during Ramadan, and to travel to Mecca for the Hajj. Unofficial religious schools, taking place in private houses due to lack of alternatives are also targeted, resulting in arrests and violent intrusion by the police. In 2014, authorities particularly intensified the curbs on Islamic practices among Uyghurs, conducting hundreds of arrests and house-to-house searches and monitoring religious leaders. China’s new law, which came into effect in January 2015, targets religious extremism by further limiting the exercise of religious practice. Local authorities continue to discriminate against Uyghur men with beards and women with headscarves, as both are considered Muslim religious symbols, while most Uyghurs regard it as a marker of their identity. Chinese authorities regularly detain Uyghurs who refuse to comply: 45 men were detained for having a beard and 37 women were sanctioned for wearing veils.

The Ramadan of 2015 served as a sad example of China’s crackdown on religious freedom. Chinese authorities in the region have forced establishments, such as shops and restaurants to sell alcohol and cigarettes to attempt to weaken Islam in the region. Uyghur Muslim women are reported to be particularly targeted by police violence. In February 2015, Muslim imams were forced to dance in the streets, swear to oaths and brandish slogans that glorify the state over religion. Later that year, the Chinese authorities have issued a ban on 22 common Muslim names.
Uyghur Women
Female Uyghur have been victims of severe violations of their dignity and individual rights in cases of forceful sterilizations and abortions, particularly, in rural areas. Another issue related to the suppression of Uyghur women concerns numerous attempts to prevent them from wearing headscarves and forcibly change their clothing habits. The government is also implementing a policy that includes transferring young, unmarried Uyghur women to work in southern China – where they are in many cases exploited.

Sinicisation Policy
Uyghur language schools have been banned, or merged with Chinese language schools, and Chinese has been imposed as the language of instruction. Throughout the country, hundreds of thousands of books written in Uyghur language have been burned. Since the end of 2013, Chinese universities in East Turkestan have obliged students to declare their allegiance to the Chinese Government and to pass a test on political views before being able to graduate. Employment opportunities in cities have been limited for those with no or little knowledge of Mandarin, further excluding a large part of the Uyghur community from the labor force.

Economic Policy
Due to demographic changes, assimilation pressures, unequal distribution of power and influence, and a general preference to conduct business in Mandarin, there is widespread unemployment among the Uyghur population and it is growing at an alarming rate. Despite East Turkestan’s natural wealth, the Uyghur people live more or less at mere subsistence level with almost 80 percent living below the poverty threshold. The rich resources of East Turkestan, including oil, gas, uranium, gold and silver reserves are transported to mainland China. The exploitation of these natural resources is strictly controlled by the Chinese Central Government. Local Uyghurs have no control over these resources; they have no access to information on profits generated by these resources and have no chance to benefit from their own wealth.

Moreover, in recent years, Chinese authorities have demolished hundreds of Uyghur enterprises in various parts of mainland China, harassed Uyghur entrepreneurs and deported them to East Turkestan. Uyghurs are discriminated against even when travelling on business around China and discriminated from staying in top class hotels.
Media Freedom

International media outlets face huge obstacles in the region. Information is strictly controlled by the State and accurate statistics or reports are hard to come by. Chinese authorities issue incorrect or false information in order to block issues pertaining to East Turkestan from becoming known internationally as made evident in a secret document of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. The document, entitled “Defending the Stability of Xinjiang”, adopted on March 19, 1999, briefly states that “…through disinformation, prevent by all means, the separatist forces from making the so-called East Turkestan problem international”.

After the July 2009 incidents, Chinese authorities imposed a repressive information crackdown on Uyghurs, leaving East Turkestan completely cut off from the outside world for about ten months, having no functional communication channels available. Since then, arbitrary detentions of Uyghur journalists, professors and writers are common.

Among many others, Professor Ilham Tohti has been serving a sentence of life imprisonment since 2014 for his peaceful and moderate stance against China’s anti-Uyghur policy and calls for dialogue. Uyghur use of the Internet is also subjected to particular censorship, control and intimidation by Chinese officials. The detention of bloggers and webmasters from East Turkestan is also an alarming reality.

In 2015, Mr Zhao Xinwei, a former editor-in-chief of the official Communist Party publication in East Turkestan who had highlighted China’s ruthless policy of silencing alternative voices, was prosecuted on charges of corruption after he “improperly discussed” and “publicly made comments in opposition” to party views on the East Turkestan region.

Freedom of Movement

Freedom of movement for Uyghurs in East Turkestan became a serious issue in 2014 as numerous checkpoints and roadblocks have been set up throughout the region for monitoring the whereabouts of Uyghurs.

Uyghurs also face problems with passport acquisition and travel restrictions. ID cards are necessary to move from place to place, and an additional green card is required to make purchases. Additionally, the authorities have inspected the content of smartphones held by Uyghurs at the checkpoints.

According to WUC, any content showing a mere hint of separatism or sanctioned religious activity can cause an arrest on terrorism charges. International phone calls and email communication are heavily monitored and the Internet is regularly shut down following public unrest.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

From ancient times East Turkestan was the seat of various Turkic states founded in Central Asia, within the borders of various Turkic Dynasties such as the Hun (220 B.C.-386 A.D), Tabghach (386-534), Kok-Turk (552-744), Uyghur (744-840), Idi-kut Uyghur Kingdom (850-1250), Karakhanid (840-1124) and the Uyghur-Mongol Confederation (1218-1759). The Chinese, seizing opportunities created by the occasional weakening of such states launched six major invasions on East Turkestan between 104 B.C. and 744 A.D. But these invasions activated no permanent success, until the last invasion in 1876. After this invasion, East Turkestan was given the name “Xinjiang”, meaning “New Dominion” and it was annexed into the territory of the Manchu empire on November 18, 1884.

In 1911, the Nationalist Chinese, under the leadership of Dr. Sun Yat Sen, overthrew the Manchu rule in China and established a republic. The Nationalists then claimed East Turkestan even though the link between the two nations had been merely a shared colonial presence of the Manchu.

Between 1863 and 1949 the Uyghurs staged 105 major uprisings against the Manchu and later the Nationalist Chinese to regain their lost independence. Three times, in 1863, 1933 and 1944, these uprisings were successful and an independent state of East Turkestan was established. The independent state which was founded under the leadership of Yaqub Begh in 1863 was acknowledged by Tsarist Russia, Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire. But these states were short lived.

In 1949, the Nationalist Chinese were defeated by the Chinese Communists, but the Chinese Communists continued the assimilationist policies towards the Uyghur people. Under the pretext of “socio-economic reform” 96.9 percent of the more numerous Uyghur inhabited areas were driven into 30,000 separate communes, to weaken traditional family bonds.

Under the pretext of “land reform”, private land, property and animals were confiscated. Most of the fertile land in the country was given to Chinese settlers. Under the pretext of “eliminating the remnants of the past” millions of valuable books written in Uyghur language were destroyed. In the city of Urumqi alone, 370,000 books were burned. Teaching Uyghur history, culture and civilization was banned and Uyghur children were transferred to Chinese language schools. Muslims were prohibited from fulfilling their religious duties under the pretext that “attendance of prayers hindered production”. More than 29,000 mosques were destroyed. Between the years 1950 and 1972, 360 thousand Uyghurs were killed during protests and short-lived uprising. More than 200 thousand Uyghurs fled to neighbouring countries and more than 500 thousand were driven into the 19 hard-labour camps in East Turkestan.

RECENT HISTORY

As a result of political oppression, cultural assimilation, economic exploitation, ecological destruction and racial discrimination anti-Chinese demonstrations, uprisings and even bombings broke out in many party of East Turkestan in the 1980s. In 1985 thousands of Uyghur students staged a peaceful demonstration in Urumqi, the capital of East Turkestan,

In 1997 series of protests launched in Ili, northwest of East Turkestan, demanding self-rule, equal opportunity and respect for human rights. On June 6, 2001, more than 2,000 Chinese students attacked 100 Uyghur students at Changan University in Xian, and as a result several Uyghur students were severely injured. The Chinese students blocked the dormitory of Uyghur students and are said to have incited the Uyghurs by shouting slogans like “make Uyghurs slaves forever”, “take Uyghur women as prostitutes for generations”, and “Xinjiang pigs go home”.

After the terrorist attack on the United States on 11 September 2001, the Chinese authorities started to brand the Uyghurs as “terrorists”. Despite concerns expressed by the international community, the Chinese authorities are continuing to use the war against international terrorism as an excuse to launch massive crackdown on Uyghurs. In 2006, Human Rights Watch reported that “China has opportunistically used the post-September 11 environment to [...] claim that individuals disseminating peaceful religious and cultural messages in Xinjiang are terrorists who have changed tactics.”

Chinese authorities claimed that hundreds of Uyghurs were residing in Afghanistan in the training camps linked to Al Qaeda. Twenty-two Uyghurs were captured in Afghanistan and taken to the US military base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. After seven years of detention and interrogation, the Uyghur detainees at Guantanamo were declared not to be a threat to the United States or any other country. Five Uyghur detainees were resettled in Albania in 2006 and have never been involved in any criminal activity but Albania

THE DETENTION OF ILHAM TOHTI

In January 2014, Chinese authorities arbitrarily detained a prominent Uyghur professor of economics and a founder of the website Uyghur Online - a platform launched to promote conciliation between Uyghurs and Chinese - Mr. Ilham Tohti, and six of his students, on charges of ‘inciting separatism’ despite his moderate views on self-determination of the East Turkestan region. Tohti was detained by the Chinese Government in January 2014, on initial charges of “inciting separatism” and sentenced to life in prison. His eventual sentencing, following months of questionable conduct on the part of the authorities, was undeniably politically motivated. Moreover, seven of his students were sentenced to up to eight years in prison simply for their association with Mr. Tohti. International community condemned Mr Tohti’s detainment, particularly the United States, the UK, Canada, Germany, Australia and Italy. The US State Department considered the arrest as “part of a disturbing pattern of arrests and detentions of public interest lawyers, internet activists, journalists, religious leaders and other who peacefully challenge official Chinese policies and actions”. Otherwise, however, there has been a regular silence on issues concerning Uyghur rights.
refused to take any more inmates for fear of total disintegration of economic ties with China. Bermuda accepted four detainees in June 2009, causing friction with the UK government since it is a British Overseas Territory. Palau is finalising the resettlement of all the remaining Uyghur detainees. They were not “linked to the Al Qaeda training camps” as the Chinese authorities have claimed, but they were simply at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The most recent racial killings took place on June 26, 2009, at a toy factory in Shaoguan, Guangdon province of China. A massive Chinese mob attacked Uyghurs working in the toy factory. The official Chinese media reported that during the attack only two Uyghurs were killed. Jonathan Watts, a correspondent of the Guardian newspaper, reported about an interview with a Chinese man who was involved in Shaoguan racial killings and who stated that he personally “helped to kill seven or eight Uyghurs, battering them until they stopped screaming”. He also added that the death toll could be around 30.

Uyghur students organized a peaceful demonstration in Urumqi, the capital of East Turkestan on July 5, 2009, to express discontent with the Chinese authorities’ response to the beating and killing of Uyghur workers at the toy factory. The protesters intended to seek justice for the victims in Shaoguan and to express sympathy with the families of those killed and injured. Chinese security forces opened fire upon the demonstrators. The Chinese authorities claimed that 12 Uyghurs were killed during the clashes. But family members relayed information to their family members in the diaspora that the Chinese security forces together with the Chinese mobs killed more than 1,000 Uyghurs, arrested around 5,000 and injured more than 3,000 in the days of unrest that followed.

The silencing of Uyghurs has not been limited to arbitrary arrests of prominent, moderate intellectuals, but is becoming increasingly systematic since the 5 July 2009 clashes in Urumqi. In the aftermath, hundreds of Uyghurs were arrested and held incommunicado, reinforcing a trend that has since grown: forcibly disappearing people, giving no indication of their whereabouts to family or friends. Chinese security forces regularly conduct raids in Uyghur areas, arresting dozens of people on charges of sparking social unrest.
Since the deadly Urumqi clashes in 2009, the political and security situation in the region of ‘Xinjiang’ has become increasingly tense. The reports of Uyghur writer, Mr Nurmemet Yasin, dying in Shaya prison ‘sometime in 2011’ are still unconfirmed. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2005 for his allegory of the Uyghur people's yearning for freedom entitled “Wild Pigeon”. Such harsh sentencing was shocking many at the time, but it become a standard treatment of Uyghur writers, such as Gheyret Niyaz and Gulmire Imin, who defy the authorities. Since April 2013, a new phase of escalation of interethnic tensions has been observed and there has been a dramatic increase in the use of violence in the region towards the end of 2013, spilling over into the New Year.

Detentions have been on the rise, with hundreds arrested since China’s one-year anti-terror campaign was introduced. China’s Chief Prosecutor of the Xinjiang People’s Procuratorate stated that arrests doubled compared to 2013 as a direct result of the new counter-terror campaign. He claimed that 27,164 “terror suspects” were arrested in the region in 2014.

Throughout 2014, Chinese authorities continued forcibly resettling Uyghur farmers and herders from mountain townships to make a way for tourist resorts without any compensation. Chinese authorities also deported large numbers of ethnic Uyghurs back to East Turkestan from the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan. There have been indications that since March 2014, the Chinese cities have stepped up measures targeting Uyghurs based on their ethnicity.

The deadliest episode since the July 2009 protests occurred on 28 July 2014. One of the causes of the initial protests was the killing of at least eleven people in a dispute over a woman who was forced by the police to have her headscarf removed during a house search. The incident took place near Tasheriq village, Aksu Prefecture.

Chinese media stated that ninety-six civilians were killed and hundreds injured when security forces and police clashed with the protestors in Yarkand County, Kashgar prefecture. 215 were arrested. Uyghur sources stated that up to 3,000 Uyghurs were killed during and after the protests, thousands were arrested and an unknown number had disappeared. According to the WUC, nearly all of those participating in the protests were killed by the police and security personnel.

The Chinese Government claims that Uyghurs have received training, weapons, finance and ideology from Islamist militants in neighbouring Afghanistan and Pakistan.

However, very little evidence has been produced in support of these claims. Chinese authorities claimed that hundreds of Uyghurs were residing in Afghanistan in training camps linked to Al Qaeda.

Twenty-two Uyghurs were captured in Afghanistan in the years following the 11 September attacks and taken to the US military base in Guantanamo Bay. After seven years of detention and interrogation, the Uyghur detainees were declared not to be a threat to the United States or any other country.

CULTURE, RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Prior to Islam, the Uyghurs believed in religions like Shamanism, Buddhism and Manichaeism. Buddhism entered East Turkestan at the beginning of our era. It quickly spread among the Uyghurs. Uyghurs embraced Islam in 934, during the reign of Satuk Bughra Khan, the Karakhanid ruler. He was the first Turkic ruler to embrace Islam in Central Asia.

The main language spoken in East Turkestan is Uyghur. With some minor dialect differences, the Uyghurs can communicate with the Kazaks, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and the Tatars. Over several centuries, Uyghurs have used three kinds of scripts. When they were confederated with the Kög-Türks in the 6th and 7th centuries, they used the Orkhun script. Later, Uyghurs adopted
their own script, used not only by Turkic peoples, but also by the Mongols and the Manchu in the early stage of rule in China. After embracing Islam in the 10th century, Uyghurs gradually adopted the Arabic alphabet, but common usage of Arabic script came only in the 11th century. Uyghurs of East Turkestan are still using the Arabic alphabet.

The first Uyghur literary works were mostly translations of Buddhist and Manicheist religious text books. Narrative, poetic and epic works of Uyghurs emerged later, some of which have been translated into German, English and Russian. After embracing Islam, hundreds of Uyghur scholars emerged and new books were written. Some of these works include Uyghur scholar Yusuf Has Hajip’s work entitled Kutatku Bilik, Mahmt Kashgari’s Divan-I Lughatit-Türk and Ahmet Yüksen’s’s Atab-bel Hakayik.

East Turkestan is home to powerful rivers, a hot desert, steppe mountains and plateaus. East Turkestan is home to three of the largest mountain ranges in Asia: the Altay, the Tengri Tagh (Celestial or Heavenly Mountain), and the Karakol Tagh (Kunlun Mountain). Tengri Tagh , runs through the middle of the country and divides East Turkestan into two parts. East Turkestan’s climate is continental. During the day it is very hot and during the night it is cool. The average temperature in summer is around 30 degrees Celsius. In winter it is around -16 degrees Celsius.

Uyghurs had extensive knowledge of medicine and medical practice. Sung Dynasty (906-960) sources indicate that Uyghur physician, Nanto, travelled to China and brought with him many kinds of medicines unknown to the Chinese. There are 103 different herbs for use in Uyghur medicine recorded in a medical compendium completed by Li Shizhen (1518-1593), a Chinese medical authority. Tatar scholar Prof Rashid Rahmeti Arat has written two valuable books in German “Zur Heilkunde der Uyghuren” (“Medical Practices of the Uyghurs”) in 1930 and 1932, relying on documents discovered in East Turkestan. Among the documents he studied he found a sketches and explanations of acupuncture. Relying on this document, some Western scholars claim that acupuncture was actually an Uyghur discovery.