

passing

How an American of Italian, Ukranian, and Austrian descent ends up passing for a native of Xin Jiang

There was a period of time, about a year ago, in which on any given moment on any given day, I was thought to be Kazak, Pakistani, Afghan, Uzbek, Turkish, or any number of Chinese ethnicities. This is amusing because I'm a typical American hybrid, a mixture of Italian, Ukrainian, and Austrian ancestry. When I put a bandana over my brown, curly hair, and slip on my knapsack, I look like any other young American backpacker. To be mistaken for a central Asian Muslim woman is, well, it's among the delicious oddities of traveling.

When I arrived in central China in February of 2002, I was only the seventh foreigner to walk the streets of the small town of Xian Tao, where I was an English teacher at the local high school. My foreign presence was met with blatant curiosity. Both colleagues and passersby would greet me with a confused stare or a warm smile, the way one would look at a baby or a puppy. But more often than not, I was the victim of the "point and shout." Just walking down the street or taking a trip to the vegetable market would put me at the center of hordes of index fingers waving around my face, followed by incomprehensible shouts or name-callings of some sort.

Then I learned what was being said about me. It was one of three words. Either I would be pointed at and called a *lao wai*, a foreigner; a *wai guo ren*, a person from another country; or more commonly, a Xin Jiang *ren*. The latter took me quite some time to figure out, and even longer to accept. As it turned out, Xin Jiang *ren* means a person from Xin Jiang, the largest and northwest most Chinese province.

Well over 90 percent of Chinese people are Han. All of the inhabitants of Xian Tao were Han except for fifteen Xin Jiang *ren*, and three foreign teachers, myself included. As Xian Tao's Xin Jiang people keep to themselves, avoiding confrontation, and worse, assimilation, Xian Tao's Han population had little contact with other people. This cultural

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isolation, combined with the fact that I was not their typical image of an American — not tall, fat, blonde, loud, and arrogant — I was then, by default, a Xin Jiang ren.

As I started to learn Chinese, I would allow people to continue thinking I was from Xin Jiang. After all, it was pretty interesting to live life as an ethnic Chinese minority. In fact, it was so intriguing a notion that it prompted me to set out on a two-day train ride from my teaching post in central China to the vast land of Xin Jiang, which comprises one-sixth of China's landmass while remaining its most scarcely populated province.

Uttering the words "Xin Jiang," meaning "New Frontier" in Mandarin, to a central or eastern Chinese person usually evokes one of two reactions: either complete awe of the mysterious frontier, or fear of the Uyghur population, the multi-ethnic Muslim peoples with Asian, Middle Eastern, and European physical features I was mistaken for. When arriving in Xin Jiang's capital city of Urumqi, I quickly came to see how this combination of fear and fascination morphed into a web of racism and separatism.

As Xin Jiang's Uyghur population does not want to be assimilated into Han culture, and the Chinese government wants Xin Jiang's rich, natural resources and massive expanse of land, ordinary daily life in Xin Jiang revolves around the Han vs. Minority dichotomy. For example, although China insists its citizens set their clocks and watches to Beijing Time (Beijing is technically two hours ahead of Xin Jiang), the Uyghurs refuse, using their own unofficial time while airplanes, banks and local Hans operate on Beijing time. As you can imagine, this complicates things when setting up appointments and meetings. And although China's official language is Mandarin, the Uyghur schools are instructed in their mother tongue, a Turkish dialect with an Arabic-based script. If Uyghurs and Han Chinese students happen to attend the same university, they are housed in separate dorms,

pictured: a young woman from Xin Jiang Province picking wildflowers on the outskirts of Taxkorgan.

eat in separate dining facilities, and except for extraordinary circumstances, are taught in separate classes. Meanwhile, the Chinese government is providing incentives for Hans to relocate to Xin Jiang, grossly distorting the proportion of Hans to Uyghurs.

I quickly learned all this about Xin Jiang upon my arrival to its capital city of Urumqi in February of 2003. I ended up staying for five months, both teaching and traveling extensively throughout the province. Ironically enough, Xin Jiang, or East Turkistan as it is called by many Uyghurs, with its historical intermingling and then subsequent separation of cultures, was where my American identity veiled itself, and my identity simultaneously became more ambiguous and more transparent.

This had its advantages. Hotel owners who only accepted Chinese guests would not question my nationality, and travel became much, much cheaper. There were transportation perks as well. When traveling out that far in China, near the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Chinese police heavily patrol the roads leading in or out of the country. To be caught with a foreigner in your car, even if you happen to be a legitimate bus or taxi driver, warrants stiff fines. This makes it nearly impossible for a foreigner to hitchhike, but with my Chinese identity, it was no problem.

Once, while hitchhiking with a Uyghur friend, our car was stopped by the police and we were questioned in Mandarin. The officers, all Han, asked us where we lived and worked and what we were doing. Looking back now, it's hard to believe I told a Chinese Politburo officer, complete with Communist uniform and oversized gun slung around his chest, that I was indeed a Chinese citizen. What's even more remarkable is that he believed me.

Although the Hans automatically mistook me for a Uyghur, the Uyghurs would usually suspect something was awry when I spoke to them in Mandarin. Why would I speak to a fellow Uyghur in the Han tongue? I once went to a Uyghur wedding in a very small village in southern Xin Jiang. It was a scorching hot summer day and a Uyghur friend and I were walking through a village just outside of his hometown. Through the dust, we saw a large pick-up truck head toward us, the back overflowing with giddy Uyghur women dressed in their finest traditional dresses and headscarves. "A wedding!" exclaimed my friend, and we just went with the flow of the crowd, toward the bride's house. As it turned out, my friend knew someone there, which meant that we were officially invited to join in the festivities.

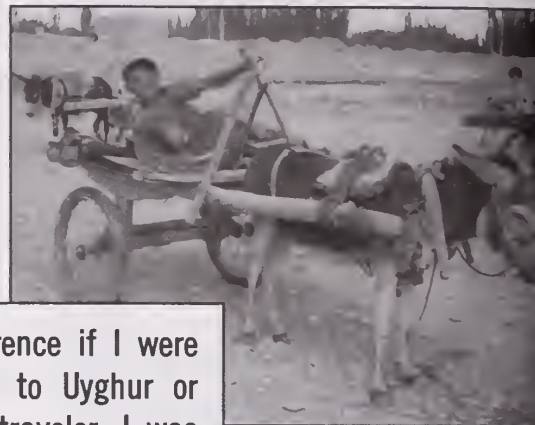
Uyghur houses are a series of connecting rooms arranged in a hollowed-out square shape, with a giant courtyard in the middle. The men danced, sung, and played music outside while the women did the same inside. My friend stayed outside, while I shyly went into the house and was surprised to be welcomed by the mother

of the bride. I was even more surprised when she asked if I was Han. Certainly, I didn't look Han, but why else would I use that language to talk with her? I did not want to reveal my identity, fearing it would result in an abundance of attention. However, as Hans rarely go

to such poor Uyghur villages, I was welcomed as a special guest, nonetheless. This was the only time I saw Uyghurs and Hans genuinely enjoying one another, even though I wasn't genuinely Han. It was quite a change from the arguments I heard over the seating arrangements on a public bus a few days before, as the Hans and Uyghurs refused to sit next to one another. In a way, I began to feel that ethnicity was not important. What's the difference if I were Han as opposed to Uyghur or American? As a traveler, I was able to transcend this aspect of identity because I was not subject to the regulations imposed by culture; but I was open to — and inspired by — them.

While in Taxkorgan, a small town in the south of Xin Jiang, close to Tajikistan, I was never even asked where I was from, as people just assumed I was either Uyghur, Tajik or a Chinese-Tajik because they were so accustomed to seeing foreigners arrive with tour groups as opposed to with Uyghur friends. For the first time in years, I would have dinner in people's homes and they would not treat me like some sort of foreign creature. I felt partially as though I was deceiving them, and partially as though I was sharing a secret with myself as I took on the roles of all these different ethnicities. It allowed me to eat rice with my hand and share nan bread with people who would normally just stare instead of talking to me.

On my last day in Taxkorgan, I was invited to pick flowers by a little Tajik girl whose family had emigrated from Tajikistan to China two generations before. She believed I was from her homeland, but I blew my cover when I revealed a Nikon single lens reflex camera. She was stunned and ran inside to her home and came out donning a beaded hat with a yellow veil. Most of the Tajik women in Taxkorgan wore such hat/veil combinations, but hers was more intricately woven, and I immediately knew it was for special occasions only. The girl told me her mother wore it on her wedding day and that when she was old enough she too will hand-make her own wedding veil. Although she clearly wanted me



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to take her picture with the headpiece, she could only stare back at me reluctantly when I asked her to smile. As it turned out, it was the first time she was photographed.

As an avid traveler, I must admit to being attracted to

the absurd happenings that can only occur when being displaced from one's usual surroundings. That, for me, is the most fascinating part of traveling. It is only apt that Xin Jiang, as the historical East-meets-West crossroads and the setting of China's famous magical folktale of the Monkey King's Journey to the West, along with its own cultural crises, became more than just a backdrop for a new place to tour. It actually became such a part of my identity. After just a brief amount of time there, I felt as though I too had undergone some sort of identity exploration and cultural metamorphosis.

When I think back to my time in Xin Jiang, I remember the severe dichotomies: the blizzard I arrived in, followed by the unquenchable desert thirst that five months later left my throat and body dry; the high mountain ranges separating the region from its Muslim neighbors, and the low Turpan basin, open to the world and to the elements; the smoggy air and little red taxis of the capital city, Urumqi, and the donkey carts and hand-pumped water of the smaller villages; and of course the ethnic divide of Han and Uyghur, all of which had tugged at my American traveler's façade.

As a traveler, life can sometimes appear unreal. Cultures and people and food and daily happenings exist not in reality, but rather as a sort of display for the hedonistic voyeur. To step outside of my *wai guo ren*, or outsider's skin, was more like a travel of the spirit than of the usual sort. And so I realized, upon leaving Xin Jiang, on my way to the airport along a dusty, dirt road that wove through the cities and towns and cut through the mountains rather haphazardly, that I too was just cutting through, as if without reason, leaving behind by own dusty path of unfinished identities. ☆