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Location: The Ainu, who number approximately 6,500 people, live scattered over a wide area of northwest China. The Ainu inhabit the six counties of Hetian, Luopu, Moyu, Shache, Yingjisha, and Shulekuche, near the famous ancient city of Kashgar.¹ Kashgar, a giant oasis 1,290 meters (4,230 ft.) above sea level, is almost totally inhabited by Uygur, Uzbek, Tajik, and Kirgiz Muslims.

Identity: For reasons that are unclear, the majority of Uygur despise the Ainu and call them Abdal, which means “beggar”.² The Uygur refuse to intermarry with the Ainu, who are linguistically, culturally, and socially a distinct people group.

Language: The Ainu language has the same grammar as Uygur, but in addition, as much as one-

third of the Ainu vocabulary consists of Persian words.³ In fact, some scholars label Ainu as an Iranian (Persian) language.⁴ The Ainu speak their language at home but must use Uygur to communicate with outsiders. The Ainu in China are not related to the identically named Ainu of Japan and Russia.

History: The history of the Ainu is shrouded in uncertainty. Why they came to be hated by their fellow Muslims is a mystery. Their Persian language suggests they probably originated in Central Asia long ago. Kashgar is one of the most isolated cities in China. To reach Kashgar from Beijing once required two years’ travel by camel. It is located more than 3,000 kilometers (1,850 mi.) from Beijing and is even a grueling three-day bus journey from Urumqi,

the capital of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Kashgar today has more in common with nearby Pakistan than with the rest of China.

Customs: Most Ainu lead simple lives, herding sheep and goats. Some Ainu men in recent years have been forced to travel to other large cities in Xinjiang to seek employment in industry and construction.

Religion: The Ainu are Muslims of the Sunni sect; they worship in mosques scattered throughout their villages. They have been described as a “caste of circumcisers.”⁵ Few Ainu have ever studied Arabic, so even the religious leaders of their communities are unable to read the Qur’an.

Christianity: Although no trace of Christianity remains in Kashgar today, it was once a church center for much of Central Asia. Kashgar was the appointed seat of a Nestorian metropolitan bishop in the thirteenth century.⁶ When the intrepid explorer Marco Polo visited Kashgar at the time, he noted that it contained “Turks who are Nestorian Christians who have churches of their own, and they are mixed and dwell with the inhabitants as the Jews in these parts live with Christians.”⁷ Today, Kashgar is a stronghold of Islam, and the Ainu have no knowledge of the gospel message. Only a handful have been evangelized, primarily as a result of listening to the recently begun weekly gospel radio broadcasts in the Uygur language. Being a despised people, the Ainu eagerly desire the acceptance of

their Uygur neighbors, an acceptance that makes the practice of Islam a prerequisite and the acceptance of Christianity unlikely.



Population in China:
 5,000 (1988)
 6,570 (2000)
 8,290 (2010)
Location: Xinjiang
Religion: Islam
Christians: None Known

Overview of the Ainu

Countries: China

Pronunciation: “Eye-noo”

Other Names: Aynu, Aini, Abdal

Population Source: 5,000 (1992 B. Grimes – 1988 figure); Out of a total Uygur population of 7,214,431 (1990 census)

Location: *Xinjiang:* Kashgar area: Yengixar Town, Hanalik and Paynap villages; Hoban area: Gewoz Village; And in parts of Hetian, Luopu, Moyu, Shache, Yingjisha, and Shulekuche counties in southern Xinjiang

Status: Officially included under Uygur

Language: Altaic, Turkic, Eastern Turkic

Dialects: 0

Religion: Sunni Islam

Christians: None known

Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Gospel Recordings: None

Christian Broadcasting: None

ROPAL code: AIBOO

