



Paul Hattaway

**Location:** More than nine million Uyghurs live in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China. In 1876 Eastern Turkestan was invaded by the ruling Manchu army, and its name changed to Xinjiang, which means “new dominion.” Since the 1950s millions of Chinese have migrated into Xinjiang and, by their sheer numbers, have put an end to the Uyghur’s hope for an independent homeland.<sup>1</sup> Two thousand Uyghur live in Hunan Province.<sup>2</sup> In addition, approximately 20,000 Uyghur have recently migrated to Guangzhou in southern China.<sup>3</sup>

**Identity:** Before 1921 the various Turkic groups in Xinjiang called themselves by the name of the oasis near which they lived. When Turkic leaders met in Tashkent in 1921, they chose the name *Uyghur* as the mark of their identity.<sup>4</sup> *Uyghur* means “unity” or “alliance.”

**Language:** Uyghur is a Turkic language, related to Uzbek, Kazak, and Kirgiz. It also

contains loanwords from Chinese, Arabic, Persian, Russian, and Mongolian.<sup>5</sup>

**History:** In the mid-eighth century the Uyghur inhabited part of present-day Mongolia. Around AD 840 they were attacked from the north by the Kirgiz and fled southwest to their current homeland.<sup>6</sup>

**Customs:** Many Uyghur cultivate cotton, grapes, melons, and fruit trees through an ingenious irrigation system which pipes mountain water into the desert oases.

**Religion:** Most Uyghur follow a folk Islam mixed with superstition. Islam is stronger in southern Xinjiang than in the north. Today, although almost all Uyghur confess to be Muslims, few are aware of the time in history when the majority of Uyghur were Christians.

**Christianity:** When Nestorian missionaries first appeared in China in 635 AD, after they had already

been working in Central Asia for a century.<sup>7</sup> One of the forerunners of today’s Uyghur were the Turkic Keirat tribe. By 1009, 200,000 Keirat had been baptized.<sup>8</sup> During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries “the whole tribe were considered Christian.”<sup>9</sup> It has recently been estimated there were as many as eight million Christians in Central Asia.<sup>10</sup> In the fourteenth century Christianity disappeared from among the Uyghur for 500 years, and they converted to Islam. The Swedish Missionary Society recommenced work among the Uyghur in 1892. By the 1930s more than 300 Uyghurs had been converted, primarily in Kashgar. When Abdullah Khan came to Yarkant in 1933 he expelled the missionaries and eliminated the Uyghur believers in a mass execution.<sup>11</sup> Abdullah claimed, “It is my duty, according to our law, to put you to death, because by your preaching you destroyed the faith of some of us.”<sup>12</sup> Despite the presence of many Han Christians in Xinjiang, few have a vision to reach the Uyghurs. One visitor reported, “Many [church] leaders openly acknowledge, without guilt or shame, that they do not have such a burden for these people.”<sup>13</sup> One church elder, when asked about evangelizing Uyghurs, “responded by shouting, ‘You’re crazy!’”<sup>14</sup> Today about 50 known Uyghur Christians meet in two small fellowships in China,<sup>15</sup> although 400 Uyghur believers have recently emerged in neighboring Kazakhstan.<sup>16</sup> Recent reports indicate that many Uyghur in China may be on the verge of accepting Christ.<sup>17</sup>



**Population in China:**  
 7,164,231 (1990)  
 9,041,200 (2000)  
 11,410,000 (2010)  
**Location:** Xinjiang, Hunan, Guangdong, Beijing  
**Religion:** Islam  
**Christians:** 50

### Overview of the Uyghur

**Countries:** China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Pakistan<sup>18</sup>

**Pronunciation:** “Wee-gur”

**Other Names:** Uighur, Uigur, Uighuir, Uiguir, Weiwuier, Yuanhe, Huihe

**Population Source:**  
 7,214,431 (1990 census);<sup>19</sup>  
 5,962,814 (1982 census);<sup>20</sup>  
 300,000 in Kazakhstan (1993);  
 37,000 in Kyrgyzstan;  
 36,000 in Uzbekistan (1993);  
 3,000 in Afghanistan;  
 1,000 in Mongolia;<sup>21</sup>  
 1,000 in Pakistan<sup>21</sup>

**Location:** Xinjiang;<sup>22</sup> Hunan; Guangdong; Beijing

**Status:**  
 An official minority of China

**Language:** Altaic, Turkic, Eastern Turkic, Southeast

**Literacy:** 56%

**Dialects (2):** Central Uyghur, Hotan

**Religion:** Islam, Animism

**Christians:** 50

**Scripture:** Bible 1950; New Testament 1914; (Obsolete script); Portions 1898

**Jesus film:** Available

**Gospel Recordings:**  
 Uyghur #03371; Qashqari #03376

**Christian Broadcasting:**  
 Available in three dialects (FEBC)

**ROPAL code:** UIG00

