CHAPTER TWO

PLACE AND PEOPLE

2.1 Place

2.1.1 Geography

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is situated in the far north-west of the People’s Republic of China. Within China, the XUAR borders Tibet, Qinghai and Gansu, and it shares international borders in the north-east with Mongolia, in the north-west with the Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—countries which emerged as independent political entities after the collapse of the Soviet Union—and in the south and south-west with Pakistan and India.

With an area of 1,664,900 square kilometres, the XUAR covers one-sixth of the total area of China and constitutes its largest province-level administrative unit. It is one of five administrative units in the PRC which have the status of an autonomous region.

Almost two-thirds of the total area is constituted by uninhabitable desert and high mountains. About 1.8 per cent is arable land, 34 per cent is used as pasture, and forests occupy 2.2 per cent. The geography of the region is determined primarily by the three mountain ranges dominating it: in the south, it is protected by the Karakoram and Kunlun ranges, in the south-west by the Pamir, and in the north-east by the Altai. The XUAR is divided into two major geographical regions by the Tian Shan, Zungharia to the north and the Tarim Basin to the south, which are connected by several passes.

Most of the rivers (more than two hundred) and small lakes of the region are dependent upon the melting snow of the high mountains and eventually disappear in the desert, the sole exception being the Irtysh, which reaches the Arctic Ocean. Numerous small saltwater lakes are scattered throughout the region. The climate is extreme continental, generally very dry, with annual rainfall averaging 100 millimetres in

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1 For the geographical description I have mainly relied on Weggel 1984 and Bohnet 1998, 1999.
Zungharia and only fifty millimetres in the Tarim Basin. The lowest
temperatures may reach minus fifty degrees centigrade south of the
Altai Mountains, while in the Turfan depression in the east, summer
temperatures may reach forty-seven degrees centigrade.

Zungharia is surrounded by three mountain ranges: the Alatau Shan,
in the north-west, the Tian Shan, in the south, and the Altai, in the
north-east. It largely consists of steppe and semi-steppe areas, with the
Ili Valley to its west, and historically has been used mostly as pasture-
land; in recent times, cereal production has also become increasingly
important. The region also has significant oil reserves.2

The Tarim Basin is surrounded by mountains as well: the Tian Shan
in the north, the Pamir in the west, the Karakoram in the south-west,
the Kunlun in the south, and the Altin Tağ in the south-east. The
Taklamakan, a stone and sand desert, covers vast areas of the Tarim
Basin and the oasis settlements are situated along the desert edge, not
far from the foot of the mountains, which are protected by a forest belt.
On the northern side of the Taklamakan is the Turfan Basin, which is
bounded by the eastern Tian Shan range. As archaeological excavations
have revealed, human settlements were situated deeper in the Taklam-
akan about 3,000 years ago, since water was more widely available. By
the early twentieth century, dramatic climatic and ecological changes
had rendered these settlements unfit for human habitation and pushed
the oasis settlements closer to the edge of the desert. These oasis settle-
ments are entirely dependent on the availability of water, which is
supplied mostly by the melting snow of the high mountains, but there
are underground reserves as well. The economy of the Tarim Basin is
largely based on irrigation agriculture which produces wheat, maize,
rice, cotton and fruit. Sericulture, various crafts, trade, mining (coal and
oil) and forestry also play an important role in the local economy.

In addition to these two large areas, two smaller regions must also
be mentioned. The Turfan Depression in the east is also bordered by
large mountains: the Bogda range in the north, the Tian Shan in the
west, and the Quruq Tağ in the south; it is divided east to west by
the Flaming Mountains. The southern half is situated below sea level,
making it extremely hot in the summer. The oasis agriculture is main-