Chapter 12. Transnationalization as Mediation: Uyghur’s rights-based mobilization outside China

Laura Trajber Waisbich

Introduction

In June 2009 interethnic clashes between Han and Uyghur groups in the Chinese province of Xinjiang claimed 197 deaths and thousands of disappearances in less than a week. By April 2013, new inter-ethnic clashes had claimed more than 20 further deaths, and sporadic violence continues until today. In spite of their frequency, these clashes seemed to surprise the global public, as both the Uyghur and the dynamics of ethnic issues in China are relatively unexplored issues in global politics.

The Uyghur are a Turkic ethnic group in China, and the original inhabitants of a region known as the East Turkistan, today called the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang. The majority of the Uyghur are Sunni Muslims. Albeit the figures are disputed, official data states that Han, the major group in China constitute 91% of the population. Together the remaining 55 groups make 100 million people. Amounting to just 0.8% of the total population, the Uyghur are nonetheless nine million in China, plus another million Uyghur living in exile. By comparison, Tibetans in China are 5.4 million. Both the myth of a homogenous China (Shih, 2002) and the dominance of the Tibetan issue, contribute to Uyghur invisibility.

Uyghur independence and autonomy claims dates more than a century, and today there is an active diaspora, in charge of carrying on long-distance nationalist mobilizations outside China, seeking for political changes back in Xinjiang. The Uyghur quest at the international level is to visibility and intelligibility, and therefore legitimacy for their cause. Nevertheless, mobilizing at the international arena has required from Uyghur diasporic elite dealing with different intermediaries and mediation processes.

This particular chapter presents one case of mediation happening outside state-borders, and at the international arena. The aim is to explore why and how the transnationalization of contentious minority politics impacts on the form and content of claim-making. Additionally, this study also explores some possible outcomes of this transnational mediation process for the success of ethnic minority mobilization. By including an example of transnational mediation, this chapter enlarges the discussion on mediation’s contribution to understanding state-society relations, beyond State borders.

The overall case is that the transnationalization of Uyghur’s mobilization has required their inclusion in a multilayer chain of mediation with implications for the identity of the group as well as for their collective goals. More specifically, this chapter will explore three different transnational mediation moments: the first one - from diaspora community organizations - what we called mediation from within or
‘mediation as voice’. Then, two mediations from outside or ‘mediation as framing’: one from international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and a second one from other states and political actors sympathetic to the cause.

In substantive terms the combined effect of these forms of mediation is to moderate political discourse from one demanding national independence, even through violent means, to one affirming a human rights through peaceful engagement. Mediation has also offered an opportunity for Uyghur national leaders to gain some modest international visibility, but it has simultaneously sedated the movement from achieving major changes back in Xinjiang. Consequently, these conclusions point to the democratic limitations posed by the ‘double-dealings’ undertaken in mediating global political institutions.

Background

Xinjiang is a mainly desert region in Western China, comprising almost a 1/6 of Chinese territory. It harbour's much of Chinese oil, mineral and gas resources, bordering no less than eight countries (Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India). At the heart of the ancient 19th century Silk Road, the region is inhabited by distinct Turkic-Muslim populations. It is thus culturally linked to Central Asia, but politically attached to China. According to the official census, today's Xinjiang population is almost 21 million people with 46% Uyghur and 40% Chinese-Han. The remaining 14% is made up of a range of other ethnic groups from the neighbouring countries, namely Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Tajiks. Back in 1949 Uyghurs made up 75% of the population and Han Chinese, 6.7% (Castets 2003). The demography has changed mainly because large scale Han in migration, partially responding to an official policy from Beijing (Castets 2003; Starr 2004). There are some parallels to be drawn from these demographic shifts in Xinjiang and the one occurring in other Chinese Autonomous Regions (AR), such as in Tibet.

Since the 19th century, there were three failed attempts to establish a Uyghur state in parts of today’s Xinjiang territory, in 1864-1877, 1933-34, and 1944-1949. In 1949, the territory was conquered by the Communist China (occupied in the Uyghur narrative and freed according to the Chinese Communist Party – CCP). In 1955, the Province had its status changed to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). This denomination has not fully translated into autonomy as Chinese Autonomous Regions are ruled by Chinese Community Party ethnic leaders with little or no decision-making powers. Indeed, the relationship between the central government and its ‘territorialized minorities’ is best conceptualized under the frame of ‘internal colonialism’ (Castets 2004; Millward 2004).

Beyond the legal-political framework, Chinese policies towards the region have increased the feeling of frustration among its Muslims peoples. There are four main policies that have caused this. The first is the demographic shift between natives and Han migrants. Second, is the uneven economic development caused by a government focus on urban and extractive areas. Third, are cultural and linguistic
restrictions and discriminations against Muslims, and fourth is Chinese government control and repression of independent political expression by ethnic groups (MRG, 2007). All four axes contribute to fuelling the native population’s discontent (Bovingdon 2004) and attest to the failure of the Chinese government to socially integrate all its peoples.

Faced with these enduring tensions, and with no meaningful channels for dialogue with the political authority inside China, the Uyghur movement has historically divided itself in two groups, both claiming to legitimately represent the demands of the Uyghur people. These are Islamic armed groups inside Xinjiang and in some neighbouring countries, and the non-violent community organizations in exile.

The internal competition for representing the Uyghur abroad is not without consequences for the repertoires, strategies and discourses of the different groups. Those conflicting narratives are symbols of a movement internally polarized: inside China there is silent resistance or sporadic violence, and outside China moderate diplomacy, pacifism and non-violence reign. As we will see, the movement is currently caught in between ‘frustrated resistance’ and ‘sedated mediation as human rights’. Both seem unable to secure meaningful international visibility to the ongoing crisis happening in Xinjiang.

**Ethnicity, Transnational Mobilisation and Mediation**

The Uyghur – like Tibetans, Curds, Basques, and many others – are a quintessential cultural group, self-defined as such, and unsatisfied with their current political status. This dissatisfaction is the engine for collective action towards political change. Historically this change has been imagined as some form of self-government or even independent state. To date these movements have failed, and with little room for organising inside China, much Uyghur political mobilisation has shifted to the international arena.

To act transnationally is to strategically decentralize or transpose one’s issue to the international arena (Devin 2004; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005). Notably, the literature presents ethnic minority transnational mobilization as a relatively new phenomenon, responding to important global changes from the past decades. The democratization of international arena – the diversification of international actors and fragmentation of political authority and decision-centres – has enabled international organizations to gain authority, opening new channels for global civil society and marginalized groups to act internationally (Rosenau 1992; Kymlicka 2007). Minority and identity politics have also gone international, a phenomena Kymlicka describes as the “internationalization of multiculturalism and of State-minority relations”. The international arena offers, not only, new political opportunities structures, well captured by the model of the ‘boomerang effect’ (Keck and Sikkink 1998), but also is itself a global political structure that favours some models and action repertoires over others (Finnemore 1996; Adamason 2005).
More specifically, as regards the claim-making of ethnic groups, international links between national groups and external actor have been seen as the main factor explaining the radicalization of political demands, as it was famously the case in the Balkans in 1990s (Jenne 2007). Nonetheless, more recent approaches, such the ‘marketing of rebellion’ of Clifford Bob, suggest a new role for international players. Taking the example of the Ogoni people in Nigeria, Bob displays how the group reformulated and reconverted its claims to better include itself in broader agendas with well-known transnational activists (Bob 2005). This example validates the assumption that in order to secure sympathy and support from the international community, transnational ethnic mobilization tends nowadays to adopt non-violence and civil disobedience as core strategies (Olzak 2006; Barany 2002). Finally, transnational mobilization can be understood under the mediation frame, especially when key social groups are represented to others by those who speak for them when, as in the case of authoritarian Chinese rule, they are not permitted to speak for themselves. In what follows we speak of three different sets of mediators practicing two kinds of mediation: mediation as voice as practiced by diaspora organisations; and mediation as framing as practiced by international NGOs on the one hand, and sympathetic states and international institutions on the other. The chapter demonstrates how these processes of speaking for the Uyghur are influenced by the views and interests of the mediators, and the links between these views and interests and the international system. It also shows the transformative impact of mediation on the substance and style of Uyghur politics.

**Mediation as voice: grief, mobility and diaspora politics**

This section presents the first case of transnational mediation of Uyghur claims, namely mediation from within the Uyghur diaspora communities. Over time, this type of mediation can be labelled as diaspora voice, and represents the first moderation shift in Uyghur political action with the abandon of national independence claims and violence as a means to achieve this in favour of rights-based advocacy strategies.

As we have seen, faced with almost no channel left and with reduced opportunities for institutional changes in China, diaspora organizations have emerged to play a leading role in Uyghur politics. Diaspora organizations present themselves not only as the Uyghur voice in exile, but also as the legitimate interlocutor and negotiator both inside and outside China. Long-distance nationalism and diaspora’s collective action in exile become – following Albert Hirschman’s typology – a real possibility of voice against the exit option or accepting the status quo (Von Busekist 2008).

Dispersion becomes, consequently, a source of collective action. In the theory of long-distance nationalism, physical separation is often considered a radicalizing element for organizations acting in exile (Anderson 1998). In the Uyghur case exiled groups, far enough from Chinese control, are undoubtedly more vocal than the silent majority back in Xinjiang. Nevertheless, they become each day more aware of the structural limits imposed by the international system on their actions and political aims. Consequently, groups in exile are not necessary more radical than the ones
that exist in China, indeed, submitted to other institutional contexts, their agenda and strategies tend to grow differently. This trend is consistent with McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly’s (2001) notion of polarization.

There is a long history of Uyghur emigration linked to political conflict with China. From 19th century to the 1960s, Uyghur migration to the Russian Empire and Soviet Central Asia was linked to the regional power game and to the emergence of communism in the region. Today, there are approximately 800 000 Uyghurs in Central Asia and it is the oldest and largest exiled community. After this first wave, a second wave in early 1950s – smaller but more symbolic – brought the political elite of the 1944-1949 Republic of East Turkistan to seek refuge in Turkey, land of affinities and refuge. In their narratives, this is considered to be the “original exodus” of Uyghur people (Besson 1998).

The first organisations of the Uyghur diaspora (such as the Eastern Turkistan Refugee Committee, the National Center for the Liberation of Eastern Turkistan and the Eastern Turkistan Foundation) as well as the first diplomatic activities were designed and developed in Turkey. Those organizations carried an openly nationalistic pro-independence agenda and benefitted from Turkish moral, ideological and material support. This support lasted until mid-1990s and progressively faded after that (Shichor 2009). Since then, the Uyghur migration system has been to a new destination: the West, primarily Germany, the United States and Australia. These are small communities (in 2010, there were 300 people in France and 1500 in the US), but extremely organized. v

In the last 20 years there has been a growing competition amongst diasporic Uyghur organisations for the monopoly of the right to speak on behalf of the Uyghur internationally vi. As a consequence of historical, socioeconomic and strategic reasons, today’s most active communities have established themselves around this Western pole, and most specifically around the Washington-Munich axis. In this context, two organizations are particular relevant: the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) and the Uyghur American Association (UAA).

The WUC was created in 2006 after a merger between two bodies – one in Turkey and the other in Germany – and it aims at being the exclusively representative of all Uyghur organizations in the diaspora, and of representing the Uyghur people before foreign governments, international bodies and the Chinese government. It has also abandoned all open claims for Uyghur independence in favour of an agenda of non-violent opposition and human rights. The WUC present itself as a secular organization ‘struggling for the respect of Uyghur human rights’. Being relatively new, the WUC coexists with other self-proclaimed leader organizations – such as the East Turkistan Government in Exile – a much smaller organization, but openly advocating for an Islamic and separatist solution to the conflict in Xinjiang. The WUC has also incorporated democratic procedures in its own governance structure. Every three years, the Congress holds a General Assembly to elect its President and its Leadership. Elected representatives can come from different Uyghur communities all around the world viii.
The other significant player, the Washington-based UAA, has two main roles: it serves Uyghur community in the United States and it represents Uyghur people before the American government in Washington DC and the UN in New York. The UAA is also responsible for the *Uyghur Human Rights Project*, a recent initiative seeking to gather and systematize information on human rights violations against the Uyghur people and to provide world leaders and international NGOs with information on the Uyghur. Both the UAA and the WUC are led by Ms Rebiya Kadeer, a well-known businesswoman from Xinjiang, and former member of the Chinese National People’s Congress as well as the Political Consultative Congress until imprisoned for six years in 1999 under the sentence of ‘betraying state secrets’. Since 2004, Kadeer has lived in the United States as a political refugee.

Notably, the style and substance of the political visions of Uyghur diaspora organisations has been heavily influenced by the institutional context of the hosting countries. The communities in Europe, Oceania and North America have benefited from a considerable degree of freedom of expression and association, from vibrant public arenas and from access to new sources of information technology. They also benefited from the mode of engagement of those host-countries in international affairs, namely their active participation in international organizations, their growing support to minority rights and their relative openness to sectoral and ethnic lobbying.

Western countries, historically critical of Chinese government policies toward its dissidents, were and continue to be, less sensitive to Chinese bilateral pressures in Central Asian countries to demobilize the Uyghur movement and, thus, activists have considerable liberty to pursue their agenda of political and social change in Xinjiang. Also, the political culture of host countries has had a strong impact in shaping and framing Uyghur claim-making. In a strategic move, Uyghur organizations in the West have adopted the main modes of action and the main agenda of local civil society, embracing democracy, both as a vision for Xinjiang and in their internal governance structures\textsuperscript{viii}, and downplaying the historic demand for national independence in favour of a rights and freedoms approach\textsuperscript{ix}.

In sum, those spatial shifts in Uyghur political elite dispersion have had a significant impact on the content of their claim-making. As described by Ervin Goffman’s (1975) *framing theory*, the Uyghur political elite in the diaspora became aware of the limits of their agency, of the constraints imposed by China on the Uyghur’s traditional allies, as well as of the impossibility of continuing to articulate their openly separatist discourse in their host countries. As a consequence, the formation of Uyghur diaspora, understood as a meditation ‘from below’ or ‘from within’, can be understood as the first moderation factor in the shift from a potentially violent nationalism to a more peaceful and rights-based politics. This particular form of mediation has some important democratic outcomes, notably to the mediators, in this case, Uyghur diaspora organizations. As we have seen, Uyghur local and global organizations pursuing a political agenda in host countries, have not only democratized their own decision-making structures, but also have moderated their
political action: with the open refusal of violence as a means for seeking political change back in China. This section also shows that outcomes were not always intended or desired, but that changing ones political claims might be the only way to make the issue visible and to keep the struggle alive.

Mediation as framing: networks, representation and invisibility

Apart from diasporas’ mediation ‘from within’, one can also identify other forms of mediation ‘from outside’ taking place. This second type of mediation process is termed mediation as framing. While presenting the interaction between Uyghur political organizations and networks of NGOs or sympathetic States, this section argues that networks actively contribute to framing Uyghur claims, both in terms of discourse and strategies of action. This section also shows how those alliances made with external actors impacts on the forms of international visibility and legitimacy that are accorded to the Uyghur.

During the Cold War, opportunities for Uyghur action were reduced due to China’s geopolitical isolation and leadership on anti-colonial struggles. Despite some significant geopolitical changes after 1991, the Uyghur were still unable to secure meaningful changes in their political status. Both China’s refusal to admit the existence of a problem in Xinjiang and transition in Uyghur leadership in the diaspora explain this failure (Shichor 2007).

Since 2001, China’s attitude has changed. The country has joined global counter-terrorism efforts, framing the unrest in Xinjiang as a case of separatism and terrorism. Beijing has then obtained regional support from members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization against any type of Uyghur political opposition. Drawing on Uyghur separatist movement violent actions during the 90s, China has labeled the most active group, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), as a terrorist organization. Both the United States and the UN also outlawed ETIM. Experts say, however, that China exaggerates the danger posed by Uyghurs (Millward 2004; Shichor 2006; Bhattacharji 2012).

The world under the War on Terror has become ambivalent to the Uyghur people. While risking discrimination because of their Muslim identity, peaceful Uyghur organizations took the Chinese exploitation of Uyghur terror as an opportunity to denounce the government’s crackdown on Uyghur culture and social mobilization. At the same time they differentiated themselves from the military wings of the movement, advancing a non-violent agenda of calling for negotiations with the Chinese government. The non-violent call is perceived as securing international legitimacy at a time when social frustration and marginalization among Muslim populations around the world is supposedly conducive to fundamentalism and terrorism.

In today’s world, to gain international legitimacy for any socio-political change in Xinjiang means Uyghur organizations must act legally, using international law as a political resource to induce change. This process is happening in two different ways:
first, there is legal political mobilization (Noreau and Vallet, 2004) to obtain legal recognition of Uyghur national identity and protection of fundamental rights. Second, there is norm entrepreneurism (Laïdi 2005), where Uyghur political leaders are actually elaborating legal-political solutions to the conflict, from the past legal justification of independence to today’s proposals of constitutional reform and federalism.

Despite their awareness of the imperative of acting within international legality, Uyghur organizations find innumerable material and symbolic challenges to obtain the international social capital they need. Key here is first, to become visible, and second intelligible, so as to be regarded as legitimate on the international state. A central part of becoming visible, has been for Uyghur organisations to act – with or without coordination – through the Internet and social media (Chen 2010) (what some analysts have called the ‘Uyghur cyberseparatism’x). Other tactics include lobbying foreign governments they believe being sympathetic to the issue of minorities in China, and through direct action at the UN-level, using mechanisms allowing for the participation of civil society.

To become intelligible, Uyghur leaders have turned to a variety of networks that enable access to the international system, and this poses the challenge of framing the issue in a ways acceptable to such networks and to the international system. For example, the WUC is constantly seeking like-minded state-allies willing to incorporate their issue in their bilateral dialogue with China. They are also active in approaching networks of transnational activists (Keck and Sikkink 1998) in order to get Uyghur issue to be adopted in some of the global campaigns and reports from the main international NGOs.

Uyghur activists have various competing agendas: from the right to self-determination, the protection of civil and political rights, socio-economic rights, and conflict prevention to the democratization of China. In spite of this thematic diversity, two main features must be emphasized. Firstly, the choice of acceding to the international arena via ‘rights mobilization’ (Lennox, 2007). As a consequence, the Uyghur cooperate extensively with international human rights NGOs and other organizations working on minority issues. Hence, their claims are mediated by this type of actor. Secondly, and relatedly, Uyghurs focus their mobilization on ‘low politics’ arenas, in technical or secondary bodies of international institutions (Joachim and Locher 2009).

In this regard, at the UN-level the UAA and WUC have succeeded in including the fate of the Uyghur in several technical documents from auxiliary human rights bodies, such as the Forum on Minority Issues, the Human Rights Council (HRC) Universal Periodic Review, Special Rapporteurs and Treaty Bodies reports”. They have, however, failed to reach plenary discussions, both at the HRC in Geneva and at the Third Commission of the General Assembly in New York. Due to China’s political power, country delegations with whom Uyghur organizations keep contact have continuously expressed their willingness to raise the issue with China behind closed doors, but show almost no political will to raise it publicly at the UN-level.
Against all the odds, the major bilateral allies of today’s Uyghur elite are Western countries rather than Muslim ones. Despite the role Muslim identity plays in shaping Uyghur political action (Castets 2004; Gladney 2006), neither the high priority given to the protection of Muslim minorities by the Organization of the Islamic Conference members, nor people-to-people solidarity between Muslim societies and the Uyghur are strong enough to become politically significant (Finley 2007).

Among the Western allies, the examples of the European Union (EU) and the US provide us with insights about the consequences of mediation to the content and the shape of Uyghur claims. Because of the decentralization of policy-spaces at the EU-level, the issue in Xinjiang has secured support among civil society groups, media and at the European Parliament (EP). Notwithstanding some success among the European Liberal and Green parties (including the issuing of parliamentary statements on human rights violations in Xinjiang, on the high level of death sentences in the province, or on the religious and linguistic restrictions faced by Uyghurxiii) this critical view on the situation in Xinjiang receives little or none support from the remaining European institutions, such as the Council of Ministers and the European Commissionxiv.

When it comes to the US, Uyghur organizations face a slightly different situation, due to American traditional openness and permeability to interest groups and ethnic lobbies in foreign policy-making (Shain and Barth, 2003). Thus, during the George W. Bush administration, at the same time as Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was bargaining for the transfer of Uyghur political leader Rebiya Kadeer from Chinese prisons to the US, 22 Uyghur were captured in Afghanistan in 2002, wrongly accused of terrorism and brought to Guantanamo Bay. Cleared from any charges in 2003, resettlement in third-countries only started in 2006. Three of them are still in Guantanamo (Worthington, 2012). Nothing has changed under Barack Obama.

Major support to the Uyghur in the US comes from the Congress and Senate. This includes financial support to diaspora organizations from the Congress-affiliated National Endowment for Democracy. Once again, Congress openness to the Uyghur does not mean a complete support to all the issues raised by the diaspora. Indeed, it represents a selective backing of some issues converging with American political culture, such as democratization in China and freedom of religion.

Apart from this inconsistent and selective state-support from a limited number of countries, the main allies of the Uyghur cause are non-governmental organizations working on human rights and minority group issues. Taking into consideration the nature of transnational activism networks, Uyghur issues end up being included in a complex chain of transnational solidarity, made of actors working on what can be called ‘legitimacy networks’, such as the well-known human rights NGOs Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW), as well as ‘affinity networks’ – as it is the case with two smaller and thematic organizations such as the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization.
(UNPO). Both ‘legitimacy’ and ‘affinity’ NGOs act as mediators and gatekeepers for Uyghur communities to access the international arena.

A careful review of the exchanges between Uyghur organizations and the main human rights NGOs confirms the power of these networks (Lake and Wong, 2009) and supports our initial hypothesis that this interaction and mediation help change and shape the priorities of the movement, giving more visibility to some aspects of the situation that fit their larger agendas and priorities. This is coherent with the thesis that larger NGOs are actually responsible for shaping the normative evolution of international human rights law (Clark 2001; Poinsot 2004).

The situation in Xinjiang, for instance, clearly fits traditional rights NGO work on civil and political rights, and their global advocacy campaigns against the death penalty and prisoners of conscience. Nevertheless, these NGOs ‘political neutrality’ has limited the support the Uyghur get from them to the diffusion of information on rights violations, and does not extend to the underlying political conflict actually generating those same violations. Those organizations rely on Uyghur communities in exile to get updated information on the situation back in Xinjiang, but conversely, Uyghur organizations are highly dependent on the support and good-will of these well-known international NGOs – who besides their legitimacy have Consultative Status at the UN, and thus have access to international policy spaces.

Concurrently, Uyghur organizations closely cooperate with another set of organizations dealing with a narrow set of issues. This second group is composed of more combative NGOs, less consensually orientated, and with many affinities to Uyghur organizations on the topics of ethnic conflict and self-determination. Both the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) act as first mediators to Uyghur organizations in diaspora. They open the first doors to the international arena, frequently acting as filters in shaping the discourse of the Uyghur political elite, adapting it to the accepted diplomacy discourse model, and mediating between local communities and larger NGOs. One example of this socialization process is the Uyghur Leadership Training Seminar, in which the WUC in partnership with UNPO work on strategies for collective action and train young activists for a life of international activism.

This almost organic relation between Uyghur organizations and those two NGOs, mainly the UNPO, is complex and further illustrates the current and future challenges for the success of the movement. As articulated by some of the employees of those organizations (Waisbich 2010), there is always a dormant risk of acting in a paternalist fashion and end up training a Uyghur internationalized elite, fluent in international languages and capable of using the international legal system, but increasingly separated from its social constituency and from Xinjiang’s reality. There is also a major risk of the reconversion of movement’s priorities to the agenda of the main human rights organizations and the abandonment of all original political content. By reducing the whole question to a human rights struggle, the Uyghur also face the risk of losing all the channels for dialogue with Chinese government, considering Beijing’s refusal to dialogue on those terms.
In sum then, as revealed by the different sets of international alliances between Uyghur organizations, states, and NGOs there is a second mediation process - ‘from above’ or ‘from outside’ - taking place in Uyghur transnational mobilization. However, this influential mediation coming from NGO networks and sympathetic states also has a moderating effect on the way the Uyghur present themselves, frame their claims, and mobilize internationally. Mediators here act as gatekeepers, working in a chain of discursive - and practical - translation, so Uyghur claims can finally become legitimate.

The question remains however, do they become effective? It is clear that mediation has transformed the style and substance of Uyghur political action, while securing greater visibility and some legitimacy, but not much impact beyond some marginal arenas in international affairs. Further outcomes in China itself are largely negligible. . Mediation outcomes and their relation to broader state-society relations in China are thus asymmetrical, shaping more profoundly the marginalized side than the state itself. Indeed, the reality may well be that the repressive nature of China’s regime and the place it occupies in international affairs, may largely determine the failure of Uyghur – and Tibetan, for instance – nationalistic struggle.

There are other outcome of mediation that may have some long-term bearing. Here one can point to the consolidation of certain kinds of policy-spaces for ethnic and minority political mobilization. It points also to the further strengthening of some specific venues, in this case: (i) the legitimizing process of the rights-based discourse, and (ii) the preference for international protection and conflict-resolution systems, rather than fostering non-diplomatic solutions to ethnic crisis. Here again, even if the aforementioned transnational networks can be considered as widening and democratizing international agenda, their narrow rights-based discourse and their lack of visibility in upper fora of international politics limits their potential for bringing about real change on the ground.

**Conclusion**

Transnationalization is a strategy of the Uyghur movement in its quest for better political opportunities to advance its struggle for national political recognition and to promote meaningful change in its home country: the Chinese Xinjiang or East Turkistan. However, transnationalizing one’s issues also means being included in a complex chain of mediation processes with mixed implications for national recognition, rights and especially independence.

More specifically, in the case of the Uyghur, it is possible to observe two different forms of transnationalization and thus two forms of mediation: the first one from the activists and the second from the engagement with governments and NGOs sympathetic to the Uyghur cause. Both axes of transnationalization point to a constant need to defend and advance the legitimacy of the Uyghur political project before the rest of the international community, understood both as the state-system and the global civil society. In order to obtain this recognition, the movement has
progressively converted its discourse and its nationalistic project to a contemporary moderate version. In terms of the content of the claim-making, the moderate discourse is grounded on a search for the respect and the protection of Uyghur collective and individual rights. In terms of its form of action, political engagement by the main Uyghur leadership is both legalist and non-violent, and yet it remains somehow invisible, or more accurately, partly hidden to the eyes of the international community.

The Uyghur case illustrates one general instance of mediation as transnational network formation, in which one can observe multiple layers of mediation practices shaping the content and the forms of Uyghur claim-making. The first layer is the diaspora mediating communities inside and outside China. Under this configuration, issues such as the representation and legitimacy of those somehow self-proclaimed leaders still need further discussion. The second layer is made of international NGOs mediating for the diaspora. Here, the main challenge is to apprehend the dynamics of power in networks and how the asymmetries between global rights-based NGOs and more political NGOs frame the limits of the contention. There is also another layer of mediation, made up of allied states mediating the relation between Uyghur political leaders and the Chinese government.

Even if the international arena is not monolithic, in every historical period the legal-political institutional context favours some types of strategies and methods over others. In our contemporary world, the socialization of a minority group and its inclusion in the international system requires several adaption and moderation efforts. Key here seems to be renouncing any external self-determination or independence claims to the benefit of less transforming projects such as autonomy or self-government. Further, when internal self-determination is also considered too radical to be taken seriously, as with a powerful state like China, there is little other alternative that for a group like the Uyghur to define itself as a persecuted and oppressed minority seeking recognition of its rights, both as a people, and as individuals entitled to fair and humane treatment.

References


Human Rights Watch. 2009. ‘We Are Afraid To Even Look For Them’: Enforced Disappearances In The Wake Of Xinjiang’s Protests. Published In October 2009.


Kanat, K.B. 2005. Internet By Uyghur Diaspora Ethnic Media And Politics: The Uyghur Diaspora. First Monday, 10(7), July.


World Uyghur Congress. 2007. Uyghur Leadership Training Seminar. 6-10 May, The Hague – Brussels


---


ii From 1864 to 1877 there was the Yacub Beg Emirate. In 1933-1934 the Islamic Republic of East Turkestan and the East Turkistan Republic from 1944 to 1949.

iii Other than Uyghurs in XUAR, the other ethnic groups that face the same situation are Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Mongols in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR). They are referred to ‘territorialized minorities’ in opposition to other ethnic groups that

iv For political reasons, Uyghur do not call themselves a minority, they prefer the concept of ‘people’ instead. While recognizing that terminology and political labeling can be a source of grievance
among minorities (MRG, 2007), for analytical purposes, however, this present study will use the concept of ‘active and mobilized minority’ (Armstrong, 1976). This definition allows us to understand how minorities or ethnic groups politicize their cultural difference (Gurr, 1993) and use it as a tool for social change. For analysing mobilization, we will use Charles Tilly conception of political mobilization as ‘the process through which a group passes from a passive set of individuals to an active participant of public life’ (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007).

According to a mapping of active Uyghur organizations done by the author, in 2010 there were 8 organizations based in the United States and in Turkey, 6 based in Kazakhstan, 5 in Germany, 4 in China, 3 in Sweden, 2 in Australia and in Kirgizia. Belgium, Canada, France, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, and the UK all had one organization. See: Waisbich, 2010.

A complete history of the evolution of Uyghur organization in exile can be found in: Besson, 1998; Benson, 1991; Kamalov, 2005.

Since 2004, there were four General Assemblies, the first two ones occurred in Munich in 2004 and 2006, the third one in Washington DC in 2009 and last one happen in Tokyo, in 2012.

WUC democratic credentials can be through the election of its leadership by the Uyghur communities around the globe during its General Assembly. Elected members serve a three-year term. Since 2004, there were four General Assemblies, the last one happen in Tokyo, in 2012. Mr. Erkin Alptekin was the first WUC president. In 2006, Rebiya Kadeer was elected President and she is in her third term since then.

This shift may have potentially created a representation gap between Uyghur organizations and their ‘constituency’ back in Xinjiang. This remains to be analysed through new empirical research, until today not available.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an inter-governmental organization founded in 2001. It is composed of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Created as a confidence-building mechanism among neighboring countries, nowadays the organization has evolved into an economic and security cooperation forum. Its members consider the combat of the ‘Three Evil Forces’ (terrorism, separatism and extremism) as one of the main institutional achievements of SCO. For the relation between SCO and Uyghurs, see Gladney, 2006.

For an analysis on cyberseparatism, see: Gladney, 2004; Kanat, 2005; Petersen, 2006

Notably from the Committee Against Torture and the Committee against Racial Discrimination and on the reports coming from UN Special Rapporteurs, such as the one on Freedom of Opinion and Expression and the one on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions. See for instance Amnesty International (2009) and World Uyghur Council (2009).

A more complete analysis of European Parliament activity around Uyghurs can be found on Waisbich, 2010.

Actually, more than once (the last time during the 2009 clashes) the European Commission publicly stated that Uyghurs are a domestic issue from China and that the Union had no interest in raising this issue publicly, but that it could be raised as part of EU-China Human Rights dialogue.