

China Gives Official Blessing to Resurgence of Islam

By MICHAEL PARKS, Times Staff Writer

URUMQI, China—Even before the *muezzin* had finished Islam's centuries-old call to prayer—"God is great"—the 83-year-old, blue-domed Yang Khan Mosque had begun to fill with devout Muslims for noontime prayers.

Many of the 100 or so men were old and bearded, and Islam had long been their way of life. But others taking time from their workday for the midweek services were in their 20s and 30s, and there were even a few teen-agers apparently unswayed by China's official atheism.

"Islam is a living force among the people here, as it has been for more than 13 centuries," said the imam Abdullah Haji, the mosque's religious leader, "and even more people are embracing Islam today."

Like Buddhism and Christianity, Islam is enjoying an officially blessed resurgence in China, the result of the political liberalization over the last three years.

The Yang Khan Mosque is filled for the noon prayers every Friday, the day on which Muslims worship, as are the other 35 mosques in Urumqi, the capital of China's Xinjiang province in remote Central Asia. During major Islamic festivals, more than 3,000 people will attend Yang Khan's services, spilling out of the mosque onto the street. More than 20,000 came to services at the central Urumqi mosque at the last major festival.

Thousands Reopened

Thousands of mosques have been reopened in Xinjiang and other heavily Muslim areas of the country in the last three years, according to Muslim leaders, and new ones are being built to replace those destroyed during the decade-long Cultural Revolution that began in the late 1960s. In Xinjiang, half of whose 12 million people are Muslims, there are now 9,100 mosques, compared to 2,000 at the end of the Cultural Revolution, when six out of seven mosques had been closed.

For the first time in 25 years, the government has reprinted the Koran, the Islamic scriptures, distribut-

ing 30,000 copies to ensure that each mosque has one, and is planning for a much bigger printing, probably half a million, later this year.

A Chinese translation of the Koran also will be published this year, Chinese authorities recently announced.

The Chinese Islamic Assn. has been re-established, along with its branches, in Muslim areas like Xinjiang. An Islamic theological institute has reopened in Peking in the last year to train new clergy, and the thousands of mullahs, or clergymen, who were driven from the mosques by Red Guards have been brought back (12,000 in Xinjiang alone) and given state salaries.

Small groups of Chinese Muslims have made the pilgrimage to Mecca each of the last two years, traveling at state expense. The government has even opened cooking schools to train chefs for Muslim restaurants, which serve no pork, the principal Chinese meat, and follow other Islamic dietary laws.

"The Communist Party is really doing everything it can to repair the terrible damage done during the Cultural Revolution," Haji Karim, secretary of the Xinjiang Islamic Assn. said in an interview. "During the Cultural Revolution, many, many mosques were damaged, and their religious leaders badly persecuted. A number of mosques were deliberately defiled, even turned into pigpens, and some counties in Xinjiang did not have even a single open mosque. "Now, we are returning to the policy of freedom of religious belief. Religion was one of the old customs (the radicals) wanted to abolish, yet Islam has deep, deep roots here, going back many centuries. The Uighurs, the Kazakhs and the other minority nationalities of Xinjiang embraced Islam long ago and will not let go of it even under such compulsion as we went through during the Cultural Revolution."

Lacks Militancy

Chinese religious policy now seems to recognize in general that the Communist Party, in power for three decades, can coexist with

mosque, temple and church. Although resurgent, Islam in China has none of the militancy found elsewhere in the Muslim world, and religious leaders here doubt that their increased foreign contacts will mean increased fundamentalism, though it is now widespread in Islam.

"The Islamic creed, 'There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet' is a religious and not a political statement," an official of the Chinese Islamic Assn. said in Peking recently when asked whether it might be taken—as it was during the Cultural Revolution—as a threat to the party and state and communist ideology.

China's Muslim population is estimated at more than 13 million, about half of it in Xinjiang and the rest largely concentrated among minorities in Ningxia, Shaanxi and Yunnan provinces, and it traces its roots to Arab and Persian traders, themselves newly converted to Islam, who brought the religion to China in AD 651.

In the centuries since, the religious beliefs of China's Muslims, a third of them ethnic Chinese and the rest members of national minorities, like Xinjiang's Uighurs, have developed into ways of life more than the formal religious worship found in the Middle East.

Even as attendance at noon prayers on Friday has increased recently, no more than one man in 10 is present in most Muslim communities in China; women do not attend services. Yet most Uighurs, in Urumqi and in the rural communes, will observe principal tenets and festivals of Islam from birth through marriage to death.

Amul Niasi, a 61-year-old Uighur peasant at the Five Star People's Commune at the Turpan oasis southeast of Urumqi, immediately described himself as a Muslim when asked. No, he said, he did not attend prayers at the mosque, but he had been married in a religious service and expected to be buried with one, too.

"Yes, I am a Muslim, though I don't go to the mosque for prayers," said Abdullah Rahim, director of Xinjiang's Foreign Affairs Bureau.

"Through history as much as belief, the Uighur people have been Muslims. Today, we are free to believe or not believe, to attend prayers at the mosque or not. There is no coercion one way or the other. Some think that, in time, religious beliefs and practices will die away, but no longer is there any attempt to stamp them out."

The government also has moved quickly to deal with religious discrimination. When the North China Oilfield in Hebei province near Peking would not hire 33 Muslim Chinese because their religious dietary customs would be too difficult to observe in drilling camps, provincial officials intervened, disciplining oilfield officials and offering jobs to those who had been barred, along with promises that their religious practices would be respected. Government and oilfield officials went from family to family to apologize to the Muslims.

Clear limits have been set, however, on the scope and character of the Muslims' religious activities. During the meeting to re-establish the Xinjiang Islamic Assn. last summer, religious leaders were told repeatedly that they must not interfere in the state's policies and that the mosques must stress patriotism toward China, not local nationalism.

"It is necessary to assist the government in making use of religious belief to accomplish the (modernization program) and to wage a resolute struggle against the reactionaries who engage in counterrevolutionary activities under a religious guise," the association declared.

The mullahs, who ran Xinjiang's villages with an iron hand 30 years ago, when there were 29,000

mosques, were told specifically not to interfere in educational and cultural activities, not to intervene in marriages, not to "suppress talented people" and not to attempt to coerce people into religious observance.

They were also forbidden to carry out religious activities beyond the limits of their village or commune, a measure meant to ensure that the mosques do not become a rival to the Communist Party or government.

The mullahs' broad authority, temporal as well as spiritual, was curbed shortly after the Communists came to power in Xinjiang in late 1949. Islamic courts were abolished, the religious police (who used to round up backsliders for prayers) were disbanded, religious taxes were abolished and women were freed from wearing veils in public.

"We have not interfered with the individual's right of belief, and we have enhanced and protected it with recent measures," a provincial official, an ethnic Chinese, said. "But we have also freed those who do not want to believe from the old compulsion to do so or who want to worship in their own way . . . This is the meaning of religious freedom in China today."

Islamic rituals are observed again in the slaughtering of sheep and cattle, Muslims are given lighter workloads during the month-long fast of Ramadan, as well as three days off to celebrate the festival at the end, and they are buried with Islamic services and frequently in a traditional-style tomb. Chinese residents are reminded frequently not to let their pigs run loose, not to use Muslim wells and to curb their "Great Han (Chinese) chauvinism."

In the past however, Chinese officials left the impression that reli-

gious observance was tolerated largely as a matter of respecting the customs of the country's national minorities, such as the Uighurs, rather than allowing true freedom of religious belief.

Abdullah Haji, the Yang Kahn Mosque imam, who was locked in his house during the Cultural Revolution as a "demon," said:

"We have been given help in the past year that we never received before, and this year is better than last. It seems to me that it has gone beyond toleration and even respect for religious belief to a form of support. The state has helped restore many of the mosques, it has reprinted the Koran, it pays the clergy's salaries for the most part and it is providing all sorts of other support.

"It certainly does not propagate religion, any religion, but it does not stand in the way of those young people who embrace Islam."

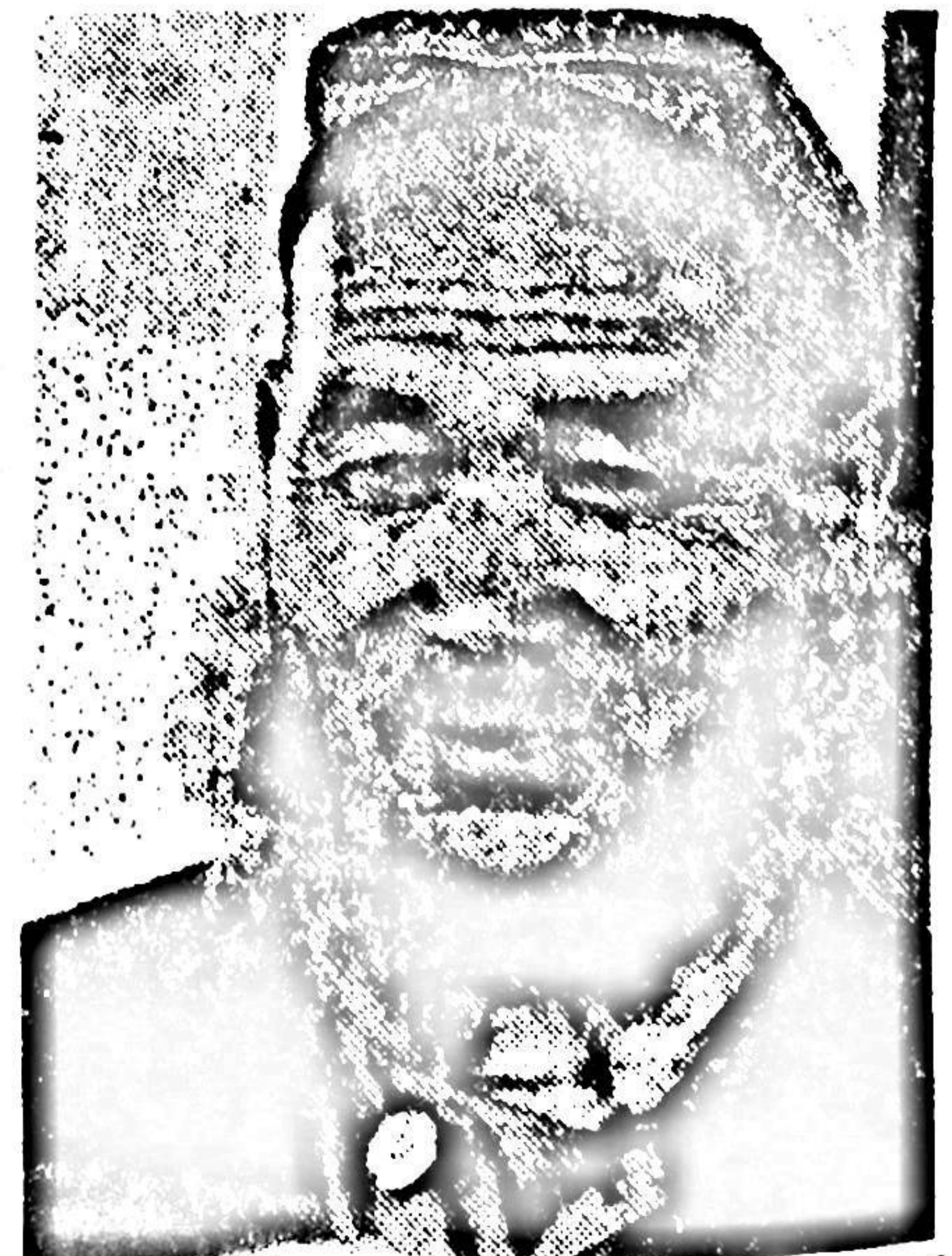
Abdullah Haji, 65, twice a pilgrim to Mecca, taught young clergy in a Koranic school at Turpan, training more than 400 mullahs, before coming to Urumqi in 1954. He says he now has an increasing number of young Uighurs coming for religious instruction at the mosque.

The planned translation of the Koran from Arabic into local languages, though heretical to many Muslims outside China, will further strengthen the faith here.

"Islam is not dying out," Abdullah Haji said. "Every day, these young men, some only in their teens, come to pray and study. They learn the prayers by heart, they read the Koran and they explore the real meaning of Islam. The faith will be passed on as men continue to submit to the will of God."



This imam is preparing for services at the Mosque near Turpan.



Imam Abdullah Haji, 65, of mosque near Xinjiang.

CHINA

Easing the grip on minorities

Despite major concessions by the new leadership it will be a long haul to modernise Chinese Central Asia

By David Bonavia

Urumqi: Policy changes affecting religion, language, local autonomy and even grain rationing are transforming the lives of China's Central Asian minority peoples. The changes — taking effect in a broad arc from Mongolia to Tibet — are evidently the work of Vice-Chairman Deng Xiaoping and party Secretary-General Hu Yaobang, both of whom are known to be sternly critical of the way Peking's minority policies were enforced under the late chairman Mao Zedong.

Although Mao publicly declared himself in favour of delicate special treatment for the minorities, in effect his followers did tremendous damage to relations between them and the Han (ethnic Chinese) in the two decades up to his death in 1976. The alienation of many of the minority people has been doubly serious because they generally live in areas adjacent to the frontiers of India and the Soviet Union, both of which have border disputes with China.

A senior official here summed up the defects of Mao's minorities policy as implemented by the Gang of Four: "The gang sabotaged the policy. Many minority cadres were demoted or dismissed during the Cultural Revolution. There were government regulations restricting use of minority languages, so that among government organs interpreters were necessary. The number of Han cadres increased. Minority cadres were sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, but have now been brought back."

On the economic front, the official said: "The Gang of Four caused and created factionalism and bottlenecks. People were not allowed to keep private plots, and were told to 'learn from Dazhai' [Mao's model agricultural project]. There were no free markets. After the gang was overthrown, the cadres were still blinkered about this. They did not know what the correct policy was, and the activism of the peasants was damaged.

"I myself was in a 'May 7th' cadre school. We managed to get the wheat to grow only two inches high, and we gave it to the animals. We couldn't even provide ourselves with seed-corn." As is now freely admitted, civilian and military Han cadres in Central Asia often behaved with high-handed arrogance, attempting to abolish traditional ways of life.

Pastoral peoples, including nomads and semi-nomads, were integrated into communes with a structure quite unsuited to their way of life. Historically, the Han and the Central Asian minorities have had

plenty of grievances against each other. For more than 2,000 years the Chinese empire — when it was strong — invaded minority homelands to chastise them, to exact tribute, or to establish colonial regimes. When the empire was weak, the "barbarians [foreigners]" preyed on China and several times overthrew Chinese emperors and imposed their own rule on part or all of the country.

During the 1935 Long March, the communist armies were sometimes harassed or attacked by ethnic minorities through whose territory they passed. When the People's Republic was set up in 1949, those same armies moved in to crush local separatist movements and drag the people into the 20th century by force.

Even sincere communists, of whom a small number had emerged among the minorities, were suspected of favouring the Soviet Union during the early stages of the Sino-Soviet split in the 1950s. During the Cultural Revolution, they were accused of lagging in supporting Mao and his far-Left policies, clinging instead to their "feudal" cultures and "superstitious" religions. From 1977 on, the party under Deng's leadership carried out detailed self-criticism about the way relations with the minorities had been conducted, and initiated sweeping reforms to gain their friendship and loyalty.

Even under Mao, certain concessions were made by the party to minority sensitivities and needs: exempting most of them from birth control campaigns, giving them extra rations of grain and cotton cloth. These have been continued and enlarged. For each minority group, there is usually a key issue that has been impeding progress in achieving national harmony and unity with the Han.

► In Tibet, the main sources of grievance have been the assault on Lamaist Buddhism and the Han attempt to make Tibetans grow wheat unsuitable to local conditions instead of their traditional staple, barley.

► In Xinjiang, the attempt to wipe out Islam was pursued vigorously in the Cultural Revolution, causing much ill feeling among Muslim Uigurs, Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Uzbeks and Tadjiks.

► In Inner Mongolia, the steppe was relentlessly encroached upon with the aim of growing more grain and sugar beet, forcing Mongol herdsmen to settle on agricultural communes and be deprived of the relative cultural freedom enjoyed by their kinsfolk in the pro-Soviet Mongolian People's Republic.

A feature common to all the minorities is the delicate balance of their traditional economies, which were disrupted by the arrival of large numbers of Han soldiers and settlers, and the Han monopoly of political power gained at rifle-point. Improvements in hygiene, health care, mass education, industrialisation and the creation of a skeletal modern infrastructure have been the main benefits of Han rule, and their value should not be discounted. But these improvements have not in themselves been enough to prevent the disaffection of minority peoples, to whom such mass movements as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were episodes of baffling chaos and a source of racial friction.

Most damaging of all, perhaps, has been the bland assumption of cultural superiority by the Han, a prejudice which has millennia-old antecedents. In fact the Uigur and Tibetan civilisations, to name but two, are complex, rich and subtle. The spirituality of the Tibetans is matched by the sophistication of the Uigurs, whose lands lie across the ancient East-West trading routes and who have for many centuries been infinitely better informed about Eurasian geography and the civilisations of West Asia, Russia, and even the Mediterranean, than have the Han.

Now, it seems, some of the wounds of Han chauvinism are being healed. Increasing numbers of minority cadres are being trained to replace the Han who at present hold most of the senior official posts. Buddhism in Tibet and Inner Mongolia, and Islam in Xinjiang, have been partially liberated from the pressures of dogmatic atheism. Urumqi is said to have some 30 functioning mosques, and every county in the region has one.

According to Abdullah Imam, a leading member of the local clergy, worshippers attend prayers at the main mosque five times a day. Supplies of the Koran are limited, but more are being printed in Peking. Hardly anyone but senior imams can make the pilgrimage to Mecca, however, if only because of the air fare. But posters and prints of Mecca are sold on the streets as a consolation to the faithful. Islam in Xinjiang is of the Sunni sect — the only important exception being the Tadjiks, a people of Iranian stock, who are Shi'ites.

"We had to deal severely with Shi'ites, who were holding fanatical prayer meetings," said an Uigur official. To many Uigurs, their religion is an integral part of their nationality. "Are you an Uigur?" this correspondent asked a young man who came up to practise his English on the

street. He proudly replied: "Yes, I am a Muslim." Even young people who do not frequent the mosque say they are Muslims. Elaborate and extravagant Islamic weddings are the rule rather than the exception, the ceremony being performed by an imam after he has seen the state marriage certificate.

In Lanzhou, capital of neighbouring Gansu province, the Hui (Chinese-speaking Muslims) can be distinguished by their white skull-caps. They have recently been permitted to open private bakeries and restaurants, buying grain privately from the peasants and selling their unleavened bread and pastries without the customer having to surrender grain coupons.

Here in Urumqi, and throughout Xinjiang, the modified Latin script introduced in 1958 is being abandoned in favour of the Arabic script, which was previously used to write the Uigur and Kazakh languages. For nearly a quarter of a century the progress made by the Latin script (which replaced the Russian Cyrillic script used in the early 1950s) has been one of the touchstones of the success of communist indoctrination in Xinjiang, and was still politically controversial in the mid-1970s. There will certainly be Han cadres in Xinjiang who view the reversion to the Arabic script as a step backwards, but it seems to be generally welcomed by Uigurs.

In Urumqi it proved impossible to verify reports reaching Peking and Shanghai of race riots, religious riots, or riots by educated people "sent down to the countryside" in the Cultural Revolution from Shanghai and other big cities, and desperate to go home. The educated youths were mostly settled in state farms and desert reclamation centres in southern Xinjiang. "They have married and had children," said a professor of geography at Urumqi University. "They are now citizens of Xinjiang." Local official estimates of the number of educated youths are in the region of a few hundred thousand — as against the more usual estimate of about 1 million.

Clearly, officialdom in Urumqi is not being frank, since one can hear from any returnee in Shanghai how serious the problem is. Even in Urumqi, some of the young Han have found themselves jobless and been permitted to open special cooperative shops and restaurants to earn a living. Others have become hawkers.

There are few overt signs of racial tension — a shouting match in a bazaar, a chalk scrawl of a policeman wielding a big club. The Han actually seem to have the

raw deal, in Urumqi at any rate, for the Uigur hawkers will inevitably overcharge them for their fresh vegetables, bread and spices. The whole Uigur way of life is better adapted to the harsh climatic conditions of Xinjiang than is the Han's.

To see an Uigur society almost untouched by Han influence, one has only to drive three hours to Turfan, a stunningly attractive oasis town in the southwest of the Gobi desert. In Turfan there are few Hans, mainly members of the local garrison, who can be seen vigorously bargaining in the city markets. Free markets, bazaars and private restaurants are plentiful. The town still gets 70% of its abundant water supply from the ancient system of wells and underground channels.

People wear traditional dress, and travel everywhere on donkey-carts. Construction materials are right at hand in the shape of mud bricks, which make sturdy and easily maintained buildings, with cellars in which people stay cool during the nearly 50°C heat of the summer months. Although admittedly much favoured by nature, Turfan shows how an ancient civilisation can be modernised and developed without damage to cultural patterns or economic disruption.

The rethinking and reforms which are being put into effect do not, of course, change the basic pattern of Han rule, which in most of the Central Asian borderlands is merely a repetition of history. Founded on occupation and military government by the People's Liberation Army, Peking's authority has everywhere been bolstered through the monopoly of real power by the Han, and this will be slow in changing, despite faster promotion of minority cadres. Even the most senior of minority political figures have been mainly figureheads — like Saifudin Azizov, the Moscow-trained Uigur who was dropped from the Politburo in Peking in 1978; the Panchen Lama, who has not been back to Tibet for nearly two decades, or Ulanfu, the Mongol leader whose position has never fully recovered from his disgrace in the Cultural Revolution.

Being seen by their co-ethnics as tools of Chinese domination, they have never commanded much popularity, a fact which has pretty well negated their usefulness. Despite the fall of Saifudin, and last year's sacking of Ren Rong, who was virtually the military governor of Tibet, there is a high degree of continuity among the senior Han cadres in minority areas. In Xinjiang, the regional communist party committee is almost the same as it was in

1975, though Saifudin has been replaced by Wang Feng as first secretary and first political commissar of the Urumqi military units. Wang is a 76-year-old Han veteran with a long history of service in Xinjiang.

Although he was in political disgrace from 1976 to 1977 and is unlikely to have tender recollections of Mao, the outward trappings of Maoism are rather more in evidence here than in most parts of China proper. Pictures of Mao and his successor, Chairman Hua Guofeng, are still in evidence, as are quotations from both men's writings, despite the fact that Mao's slogans have been erased in most provinces and his statues torn down, and that Hua is expected shortly to lose his chairmanship.

By contrast, in Lanzhou, nearly all portraits, statues and quotations of Mao have been removed. It may be that the political mood in multiracial Xinjiang is too delicate to be disturbed by any more visible signs of the repudiation of the policies of the past two decades.

Xinjiang's weakness is its enormously long border with the Soviet Union, which it must be impossible to police effectively. Illegal border-crossings by spies and herdsmen are probably still taking place here and there, though the Chinese have made every attempt to seal the frontier since the mass exodus of Kazakhs from the Ili district to the Soviet Union in 1962. Nevertheless, though it is often pointed out how vulnerable Xinjiang would be to a Soviet invasion, a trip over some of the desert-and-mountain terrain, seeing the vast distances and harsh conditions illustrates to the traveller that an invasion of Xinjiang would be a daunting task even for the Soviet Union.

The clamp-down on investment funds for heavy industry or uneconomic industries, decreed a few months ago in Peking, would seem to indicate a slower pace of development in exploration and exploitation of the mineral resources of Xinjiang, as well as Tibet and Inner Mongolia. The policy of irrigating deserts and boosting population in the frontier regions will have to be carried out mainly by the army's production and construction corps, now that educated youths from the big eastern cities will no longer consent to be posted there.

It will be a long, uphill struggle to modernise Chinese Central Asia and conflicts with the minority peoples there will persist, despite quite big concessions offered by Peking over the past few years. The desert will not bloom of its own accord.