

# U B I Q U E

Notes from THE AMERICAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

**Authors. Looking for quick turn-around on your manuscripts? Consider this: For calendar years 2008 and 2009, the *Geographical Review* averaged 1.7 months from submission to initial decision on manuscripts and 7.3 months from acceptance to publication.**

## “GEOGRAPHERS WANTED”

*By Jerome E. Dobson, AGS President*



Now, there’s a welcome sign! I’m taking advantage of the opportunity myself, and I urge you to do so soon. In the December 2009 *Ubique* (p. 1), I mentioned that I’m spending this year as a Jefferson Science Fellow in the U. S. Department of State (DoS). The same issue contained an announcement (p. 7) entitled “Fellowships Ideal for Geographers.” Here I offer a more thorough explanation in hope of convincing more geographers to apply.

My main point is that presently available fellowships offer our discipline a way to influence government policy to a greater extent than we possibly could based on our numbers alone, while simultaneously opening doors to career advancement in government, business, and academia. What I’ve learned in my time here is that geographers are ideally suited for more positions than perhaps any other discipline, but hardly any geographers apply for the most prestigious fellowships.

Jefferson Science Fellowships focus on foreign policy and diplomacy. They are for tenured faculty, and all recipients serve in DoS. In practice, most recipients are senior faculty. The program is administered by the National Academies. Yes, that’s plural: National Academy of Science, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine, and National Research Council. But, don’t let those lofty titles intimidate you. It’s a friendly place with heartfelt concern for the good of the nation. The National Academies

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## FIELD OBSERVATIONS FROM CHINA’S “NEW FRONTIER”

*Sarah J. Halvorson and Steven I. Levine*



A Sufi shrine and center of study in the ancient Uyghur city of Yarkhand.

Uncertainty was the watchword when we arrived in Urumqi on the afternoon of July 20, 2009, on an Air China flight from Beijing. It was just two weeks after the bloody ethnic violence of July 5-8 that claimed over 200 lives in the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Internet and international telephone service had been severed for all but a small number of foreign correspondents. Urumqi’s ubiquitous internet cafes were shuttered. Chinese authorities had cut Urumqi and the rest of Xinjiang off from the world, aiming to control the flow of information and impose stability after China’s worst ethnic violence in several decades.

We had been unable to confirm our arrival time with our hosts at Xinjiang Normal University, a partner

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institution of the University of Montana. Searching for a familiar face and finding none, we took a taxi from the airport to the Ramada Tunhe Hotel where we had earlier made reservations. Only one other foreigner, an eccentric solo tourist from Bakersfield, California, was at breakfast the next morning. But the hotel was far from empty: it was one of the staging grounds for thousands of People's Armed Police, China's paramilitary force that had been flown to Urumqi from points around the country to maintain order in a city still reeling from the recent violence.

Over the next two weeks, our experiences were to be profoundly influenced by the July 5<sup>th</sup> Incident, as it was known. The levels of emergency triage, inter-ethnic fears, and intensified state control limited our mobility, our conversations with locals, and our interactions with place. Our experiences at this particular juncture under-



The mountain-desert zone of the southern foothills of the Tianshan.

Xinjiang, a vast territory of 1.6 million square kilometers, roughly the size of Western Europe, constitutes one-sixth of China's land mass. This vast Eurasian crossroads, to borrow historian James Millward's appellation, is located in China's far northwest and shares international borders with Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. It is figuratively represented as three mountain ranges (Altai, Tianshan, Kunlun) and two basins (Junggar and Tarim). The lofty Tianshan (Heavenly) mountains separate the Tarim basin in the south and the Junggar basin to the north. The Taklamakan Desert, a forbidding wasteland of shifting sand dunes, occupies the center of the Tarim basin which itself is rimmed by oasis towns including Hetan, Yarkand, Kashgar, Aksu, and Korla. (Taklamakan means "abandoned house," a reference to ancient cities long buried under the sands. A popular interpretation of Taklamakan means "the desert of no return.") Pronounced "Sin-johng" in Chinese, Xinjiang means "new frontier," and is sometimes referred to as East Turkestan, a term the Chinese government proscribes because it smacks of ethnic separatism, a recurrent problem since Xinjiang was incorporated as a province into the Qing (Manchu) dynasty in 1884.

Over the past two millenia, the territory, historically fragmented, has seen the rise and fall of Chinese, Turkic, Mongol, Tibetan, Zunghar, and Manchu conquerors. Xinjiang, through which pass the northern and southern routes



The Karakoram Highway through the Pamir mountains

of the ancient Silk Road – so-named in the late-nineteenth century – is rich in natural resources and home to an ethnically and linguistically diverse population of some 21 million people. Around 60 percent are Uzbek-Muslims (Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Hui, Tajiks, Uzbeks) and the rest largely Han Chinese. Most of the latter migrated into Xinjiang during the past sixty years, tilting the ethnic balance away from the Uyghurs, whose share of the population dropped from roughly 75 percent in 1947 to about 40 percent at present.

Xinjiang's traditional oasis-based agriculture is irrigated by snow melt from its high mountains, while



City of Urumqi

modern petroleum, mining, and industrial agriculture (cotton, tomatoes) sectors provide employment to its growing population. Ever since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Xinjiang has been a focus of state-led economic development and in-migration. Precisely because of its strategic location in Central Asia, its economic potential, and its volatile ethnic mix, the communist government in Beijing has ruled Xinjiang with a heavy

hand, belying its formal status as an autonomous region.

What brought us to Xinjiang? We are engaged in two research projects: first, to assess earthquake hazards and mitigation (Xinjiang lies in a very active earthquake zone); second, to develop a K-12 social studies curriculum about Xinjiang for American students. Our hope is to expand the focus of learning about China from the east coast cities of Beijing and Shanghai to

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building is directly across C Street from DoS, so we fellows meet there for lunch at least once or twice each week. At DoS, the JSF Program is run by Nina Fedoroff, Science Advisor to the Secretary of State, who was recently elected as the next President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). She and Deputy Science Advisor Andy Reynolds rarely miss our weekly lunch sessions.

I knew all along that I wanted to work in The Office of the Geographer and Global Issues, but few applicants have any preference when they arrive. I have collaborated with the Office of the Geographer since 1982, but most applicants had no connection whatsoever with any part of DoS before applying. Job interviews start on arrival in mid-August. This year there were 31 job descriptions for 10 fellows, and most of us interviewed with four to six offices. The procedure is designed to introduce new fellows to as many people as possible. I knew where I wanted to be, but I went through the interviews anyway, mainly as a golden opportunity for networking. Still, I was like the proverbial kid in a candy shop, and I recall thinking *I've never before been presented with so many enticing opportunities, and I doubt that I ever will be again.*

For the first two weeks of September, the ten of us joined the new class of AAAS fellows for an orientation that surely must qualify as the world's best civics class. Our speakers were impressive people with outstanding careers in the legislative and executive branches. What opened my eyes even wider, however, was to learn how incredibly bright the AAAS fellows themselves are. Later, I was impressed again to realize how many of the rising stars in government got their federal positions by first working as AAAS fellows. Yet, I know many geography students and graduates who would fit right in, and I vowed to encourage my own students to apply as soon as they are eligible. AAAS Science and Public Policy Fellowships are for scholars, not necessarily faculty, with doctoral degrees at any career stage. In practice, most recipients are at early to mid-career and many of them are newly minted Ph.D.s. Congressional fellows serve in the offices of senators and representatives or with congressional committees. Diplomacy fellows serve in DoS. Executive fellows serve in every major department except DoS. All of them bear major responsibilities in designing and implementing programs and/or legislation. Imagine the head start all of these young professionals have for careers in government, business, and academia. Now think about your own future and apply. Think about your brightest young colleagues and insist they apply.

So, here I sit for one full year in The Office of the Geographer. What an awesome title! Even non-

geographers say, “Now *that is cool.*” The Geographer himself is Lee Schwartz, Director of the Office of the Geographer and Global Issues, and I report to him as Senior Scientist. We work together to promote programs that will give geographers greater voices in foreign policy. We work with other federal agencies to promote better understanding of geographic factors in foreign policy and diplomacy. We work together on humanitarian issues.

In a very real sense, I have come full circle. The Office of the Geographer exists because of the powerful role that AGS played in World War I. As you know, President Woodrow Wilson commissioned AGS to lead “The Inquiry,” a massive analysis of foreign intelligence in preparation for the peace negotiations that would follow at war's end. Isaiah Bowman took three truckloads of maps, reports, and data with him to the Paris Peace Conference, and Mark Jefferson and his team of AGS cartographers produced as many as 300 maps per week in support of the negotiations at Versailles. After the treaty was signed, those materials went to the Department of State, and the function itself evolved into the Office of the Geographer (Dillon 2005-2006).

Today, the Office of the Geographer and Global Issues has major responsibilities for monitoring, assessing, and informing the Secretary of State regarding:

- Population movements
- International place names and boundaries
- Complex humanitarian emergencies
- Geographic intelligence, mapping, and imagery analysis
- Peacekeeping and United Nations Security Council issues
- War crimes, atrocities, and early warning
- Human rights
- Environment and sustainable development
- Natural disasters

This is precisely where I want to be, and I'm certain you or your colleagues can find positions that will be equally matched to your own skills and interests. Apply, geographers, apply!

Jefferson Science Fellowships:

<http://sites.nationalacademies.org/pga/jefferson/>

AAAS Science and Technology Fellowships:

<http://fellowships.aaas.org/>

Reference:

Dillon, L. 2005-2006. “The State Department's Office of the Geographer: History and Current Activities,” *The Portolan* 64 (35-45). ■



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encompass the vast and little-known western regions of China, including Xinjiang and Tibet. Our collaborative work between a geographer (Halvorson) and a China area specialist (Levine) is partially funded by the McColl Family Fellowship Program and the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana (UM) which focuses on Asian affairs. Both projects are also aimed at strengthening a recent partnership between UM and Xinjiang Normal University.

Our trip began and ended in Urumqi, a rapidly growing city of 3.5 million people located at the base of the Tianshan mountains. In the 1880s the provincial capital was moved from Ghulja (Yining), close to the present border with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, to Urumqi – roughly meaning lush pastures in Mongolian – because of the security threat from tsarist Russia, which had occupied part of Xinjiang during a major rebellion in the 1860s. The crumbling remains of the original small settlement can be viewed on the outskirts of the current metropolis. Urumqi, which has long been a predominantly Han Chinese city, has been experiencing a construction boom of high-rise steel and concrete office buildings, hotels, and department stores in its



The Id Kah Mosque

On 5 July, two weeks before our arrival, what had begun as a peaceful though unauthorized demonstration by Uyghurs protesting the killing by Han Chinese of two Uyghur workers in distant Guangdong province, exploded into violence. Hundreds of young Uyghur men from poor oasis towns in the south Tarim basin who had come to Urumqi on 4 July were joined by several thousand local Uyghurs in the protest march near South Gate. Perhaps provoked by police violence, hundreds of Uyghurs set upon Han Chinese, the overwhelming majority of whom were innocent civilians minding their own business, including women, children, and elderly persons, and attacked them with meat cleavers, knives, sticks, and metal bars. Over 200 people were killed and many hundreds more injured. The police, who were there in force, were strangely passive for quite some time, allowing the violence to run its course. Even harder to explain was that the authorities must have had advance warning of the demonstration as numerous cell phone and text messages circulated to inform students and other young people of the planned protest. Yet, rather than nipping the protest in the bud they allowed it to gather a full head of steam.

Two days later, a mob consisting of hundreds of young Han men, many of them recent fortune seekers who had migrated to Xinjiang from eastern China, sought revenge by attacking Uyghurs on the street with staves, sticks, and metal pipes. That terrible week ended on Friday, 10 July, the day of prayer for Muslims, when two or three men stood up during prayer inside a main mosque and called for jihad, Holy War against the Chinese. The imam and others were shocked by this unprecedented outburst and called on the police. Uyghurs began fighting among themselves and violence spilled out onto the street where a video taken by one of the foreign reporters shows police kicking and beating a Uyghur man. Several people died in this incident. When we heard about this, we



Wall mural of a dancing Uyghur woman, with a Communist Party propaganda flyer taped to it.

transformation into one of the major trade and commercial centers in Central Asia. The Han Chinese part of the city has the appearance of a typical Chinese provincial capital. Only the Uyghur quarters in the south and east retain a distinctly Central Asian look and feel.

Our first impression of Urumqi was of an occupied city. On every other street corner in the southern, i.e. Uyghur, end of town were squads of helmeted police equipped with shields, rifles, and nightsticks. Truckloads of soldiers, machine guns mounted in front, drove up and down the streets. The atmosphere was tense, almost electric.