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A Han Chinese Student on the Urumqi Violence of Summer 2009

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By Timothy B. Weston

In April 2008 I published an interview at *China Beat* entitled "[Growing Up Han: Reflections on a Xinjiang Childhood](#)" that I conducted with a Chinese student named Leong who attends the University of Colorado, where I teach. Leong and I had been talking about doing a follow-up interview since that time but decided to wait until after he returned from a long-planned trip home to Urumqi during summer 2009 to do it. We figured his trip home and the feelings it generated in him might make for a good interview. Of course, neither of us could have anticipated the tumultuous events that shook Urumqi this past summer and beyond, nor could we have imagined that our follow-up interview would be dominated by such subject matter. In many respects, the events of this past summer challenge the picture of relative multi-ethnic harmony that Leong described in our original interview. The following chilling account of Leong's experience this past summer offers a rare perspective on the recent news coming out of Urumqi. We hope that it will be of interest to readers.

(Timothy B. Weston conducted this interview with Leong in late August and early September 2009. He can be contacted at: Weston@colorado.edu)

Timothy B. Weston: Please remind readers where you grew up, what your ethnicity is, and where you live now.

Leong: I am Han Chinese and was born in Urumqi in early 1980. I grew up in Urumqi playing with kids from different ethnic groups. My neighborhood is only several blocks away from Erdaoqiao, traditionally the Uighur quarter of the city. I left home for college in Beijing when I was 18 and I'm currently working on my Ph.D. in the United States.

TW: When was the last time you visited your hometown of Urumqi?

Leong: This summer is actually the first time I went back home since I left China two years ago.

TW: Please explain the timing of your return to Urumqi this summer.

Leong: I flew to Beijing first and stayed there for several days meeting old friends and taking care of some personal issues. I arrived in Urumqi on July 8th, a few days after the worst violence in the city.

I first learned about the riot on the night of July 5th, when I was still in Beijing. My mom told me about it in a phone call that evening saying that she witnessed a large number of people gathering in the city center. She was in a mini-van on her way home, and that was 7:30 PM. My mom had no idea what happened at that moment, and my impression was "okay, another 'mass incident.'" I really didn't pay serious attention to this because I know demonstrations are happening everywhere in China every day.

But things completely changed the next day. I checked the news on the morning of July 6th and was shocked to see that the death toll had gone up to 146; I couldn't believe my eyes. Later, I watched the first press conference convened by the Urumqi government and learned most bodies were found in back alleys. But I still didn't know what really happened. I remember Beijing was very hot that day, over 30 degrees Celsius, but I felt chilly when I was walking on the street, and that chill came from my heart. I rushed back to my hotel that evening and called my mom, and from her horrible stories started to trickle. I finally realized that most of the people killed were innocent Han civilians, and that they were victims of an indiscriminate killing rampage, and I was appalled at such brazen acts of terror.

My mom was extremely worried about the situation and suggested I delay my flight from Beijing to Urumqi for 2-3 more days. I refused because I didn't believe things were that bad. I took my flight as

planned on July 8th; on the plane, in addition to Han Chinese, I saw three Uighur passengers and one Western journalist with numerous bags on his shoulder (I didn't know he was a journalist until I later saw him on TV). When the plane landed I was still wondering what the city would look like. To my surprise, there were no extra security checks, though the police presence was strong.

I was greeted by two of my Uighur friends at the airport and to be prudent we went to a hotel rather into the heart of the city where there was trouble. We actually had a nice evening talking, playing cards, and drinking, like old times.

TW: That night did you and your Uighur friends talk about what had happened in Urumqi over the last few days? If so, what did you all say? What did you learn from them that you did not know?

Leong: Yes, we did talk about it and we had the TV news on for the first hour or so, watching all the interviews and journalists reporting on the riots. We discussed all the details my friends knew, including some horrible details about the killings. At that moment each of us naturally spoke on behalf of our own ethnic groups – it felt inevitable that I would speak as a Han and they as Uighurs. It became clear that my friends, like most Urumqi Uighurs, deplored the loss of innocent Han lives but also deplored the loss of innocent Uighur lives when Han vigilantes sought revenge a few days later. But we all agreed that the Uighur instigators were harming all Uighurs. My friends emphasized again and again that the killers did not represent all Uighurs and that they themselves, like Han people, want peaceful lives. None of my friends witnessed the violence firsthand but each said they had relatives or friends who did, and who helped save Han people. After an hour or so of this kind of talk we all felt overwhelmed and didn't want to talk about it anymore, so we ordered food and drink and then played cards.

TW: Are the two friends who met you at the airport, the two Uighurs, among your closest friends in Urumqi? Did the violence in Urumqi put any strain on your friendship with them?

Leong: Yes, they are, and they are the boldest ones too. You know, Uighurs were targeted by Han vigilantes only a day earlier, but because our meeting had been planned long ago, they still risked being roughed up and came to meet me at the airport. I don't think the violence has any negative impact on our friendship because we've known each other for a long time, and one thing that makes me feel very good is that we can actually sit down and talk. If there was an impact, I would say my days at home and especially times with them were dominated by this topic. Whenever we met for dinner or for fun, we had to talk about that and we constantly asked how that happened and why those killers behaved like monsters.

TW: On your way home to see your mother the next day did you see anything unusual? Please discuss the moment when you finally went home to see your mother. What did you and she talk about? Did the riots dominate what you and your mother talked about? Had your mother experienced personal danger during the riots? Had anyone she knows personally experienced danger?

Leong: The only unusual thing was that most streets were empty in a city of 2 million people. Usually the streets are busy and bustling. There was no martial law and people were free to come out, but they chose not to. I took a taxi and there was not a single traffic jam and I got home very quickly. I got home in the late morning. My mom was waiting for me outside the building and looked very worried. I hadn't seen her in two years and the first thing she said was: "why has it taken you so long to come home? Why didn't you come home earlier this morning? — I've been worried about you." My mother asked if I was hungry. I said I was not, but she still made lunch for me. During lunch we talked about the riot, but not much, since I had already learned a great deal from the news and from my friends. My mother just felt very sad. She complained that Urumqi will no longer have a peaceful life as before and that multi-ethnic unity had been destroyed.

TW: Did your mother or her friends suffer any personal danger?

Leong: Not really. My mom was on her way home on the day the violence broke out (July 5). That evening she saw thousands of young Uighurs gathered in the city center at 7:30 PM. They looked like students because they were young and clean. She saw a huge police presence there too but had no idea that killing would soon follow, in half an hour, and also the police officers were unarmed. Fortunately, she missed the violence. But starting at 8:00 PM she saw black smoke from her balcony and heard explosions. She later realized those were explosions from burning cars. Some of her friends called her and told her not to go outside because there was a riot just a few hundred meters from where she lives, which is where I grew up.

TW: How did things unfold for you during your first few days in Urumqi?

Leong: During those days my mom didn't allow me outside after 8 PM. I am almost 30 but she only let me outside during the day. Whenever I was walking on the street everybody around me was talking about the riot. I was forced to hear stories about how this person was killed, that person was thrown off an overpass, and another person was burned alive, and I felt overwhelmed by it all. I could understand the feelings of the people who wanted to talk about those things but I didn't want to walk on the streets anymore... it was too much for me. Whenever I took a taxi or tried to buy fruit from a street vendor they also insisted on talking about the riots. Three days after the riots my mom said one of her colleagues, a Han man, was missing and that his family, his wife, reported that they couldn't find him; he was a teacher at the same middle school where my mom teaches. My mom said he was probably dead because he lived in the riot zone. Two days later my mom said his body had been found in a Uighur cemetery. He had been beaten beyond recognition and local Uighurs mistook him for a Uighur. The local police did a DNA test to identify who it was and discovered the truth about his identity. That man was in his mid 30s and left behind his wife and three-year-old son, and a deranged mother. According to Chinese state media this man had been killed only a few meters from his home.

TW: So to your knowledge, were most of the people who were murdered completely innocent?

Leong: I'm not 100 percent sure but according to the state media all of them were innocent civilians, most of them on their way home after a day's work. And some of them were locked in their shops, which were then torched, killing them.

TW: How did returning to your hometown and entering this horrific scene make you feel?

Leong: I didn't witness the violence and didn't personally know anyone who was killed. But I felt that life has been changed. I didn't see even one of my college friends this time because everyone was coping with the crisis and didn't have time to meet me. Most of the time I stayed at home watching TV news and the Internet had been cut off so there was no way to contact the outside world. I felt quite bored. I felt very sad because I heard Han people around me, for the first time in my life, cursing Uighurs, something I hadn't heard out of their mouths ever before. I had the strong feeling that mutual trust between Hans and Uighurs was badly damaged.

TW: So you are saying that the two communities lived together peacefully before this riot?

Leong: Yes, at least from my own experience. Uighurs who espouse separatist ideas are only a small handful among the large Uighur population. Urumqi is a multi-ethnic city, and generally Uighurs, Hans, Kazaks, Mongols, and Hui have lived together peacefully. We are all ordinary people who make a living with our hands, why should we fight against each other to disturb our normal lives? There have been some cases of intermarriage, but not too many.

TW: How segregated were the neighborhoods in Urumqi before the riots? Do you expect segregation now?

Leong: Before the riot the city of Urumqi was mixed. There was a Uighur quarter in the southern part of the city and some Han quarters in other areas, but in those quarters there were people from the other ethnic group living as well. There were no Mongol or Kazak quarters. In Erdaoqiao, the

traditional Uighur quarter, there were Han living and doing business. The grand bazaar is located there and before the riots, at least, that was the most prosperous area in the city.

To my knowledge, the self-segregation has already begun. My mom told me several of her Han colleagues who lived in the Uighur quarter are trying to sell their condos or apartments very cheap. This is because they no longer feel safe in that area where most of the killing happened. And at the same time my Uighur friends told me that many Uighurs are trying to move into the Uighur quarter from other parts of the city. I think this is because they feel unsafe living with mostly Han people. My friends told me that the government was freezing the transactions because it doesn't want to see the city become segregated. Several Han shop owners in Erdaoqiao tried to sell their shops but were stopped by the government, which told them to stay there and to continue to do business.

TW: How did the other ethnic groups in Urumqi—the Kazaks, Hui, and Mongols – experience all of this?

Leong: I have no idea. Most of my friends are either Han or Uighur. I don't have many friends from those other ethnic groups [whose numbers in Urumqi are significantly smaller].

TW: Can you comment more on the damage this violent episode has done to the Uighur population in Urumqi?

Leong: I think the purpose of the killing and violence was to destroy mutual trust and multi-ethnic unity between Uighurs and Han, and by that measure it was very successful. The Han people killed that day were all innocent people. The killers must have known that this would lead to a response from Han Chinese. Two days later, on July 7, Han vigilantes, including many who belonged to bereaved families, rose up, violated police controls, and killed some Uighurs and destroyed Uighur property. Tens of thousands of Han tried to attack the Erdaoqiao area [the Uighur quarter] chanting slogans like "flatten Erdaoqiao," but riot police blocked them with tear gas and truncheons. Those people were very angry that the police stopped them. The local Party boss even bowed before the crowd and begged people to disperse.

Since coming back to the States I've been in close contact with my family and friends in Urumqi and have learned that hundreds of people, mostly Han, have been pricked with syringes, and that many believe those syringes were contaminated with deadly diseases like HIV or Hepatitis. This has now become an international news story. I know this is again aiming to destroy the sense of safety among common people. People in Urumqi now no longer dare take buses or other forms of public transportation.

TW: How long did you stay in Urumqi this past summer? When did you get back to the United States?

Leong: I stayed in Urumqi for about a month and got back to the States in mid-August. During the first several days after I got back, I still felt I was in Urumqi, my mind was full of the memory of the people and scenes of that city. I realized that I was traumatized too and I didn't fully get back to myself until a week later.