

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Chinese Muslim Floating Population: Survey on Social Relations

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Abstract

This study investigates the issues related to the social life of the Uyghur Muslim floating population in mainland cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Wuhan. The study is divided into: the basic characteristics of the survey subjects (age and gender, marital status, living expenses); living conditions (difficulties in language barriers, diet, and housing); social-level survey (social relationships among the Uyghur Muslim floating population, differences in social relationship networks among different occupational groups, leisure activities, and leisure and entertainment); and health problems among the Uyghur Muslim floating population, along with other social life issues.

Keywords: China, Muslim, Floating Population, Social Relations, Social Integration.

1. Introduction

The challenges faced by Uyghur Muslims in mainland cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Wuhan stem more from social barriers than economic conditions. While sharing some difficulties common to all floating workers, Uyghurs experience unique obstacles tied to their ethnic identity, linguistic barriers, and cultural practices. Language limitations restrict their access to education, employment, and integration into urban life. Discrimination and stereotypes further isolate them, affecting housing, job opportunities, and social acceptance. Social networks are often confined to their ethnic group, limiting broader community engagement. Educational opportunities for Uyghur children are hindered by language barriers, institutional obstacles, and high costs, perpetuating exclusion from local schools. Limited access to mosques, halal food, and recognition of religious practices compounds their struggle to maintain cultural and religious traditions. Existing policies for floating populations often fail to address the specific needs of Uyghurs, leaving them marginalized. Addressing these issues requires targeted, inclusive measures to promote equitable integration while preserving their cultural identity.

2. Social Relations of the Uyghur Muslim Floating Population

Almost all Uyghur Muslims surveyed expressed feelings along the following lines:

“They just see that we look different. Every ethnic group has good and bad people, but they think that Xinjiang people are not good. Their attitude and gaze are not very good. Especially since the July 5th Incident, they have been even more discriminatory towards the people of Xinjiang, using that discriminatory perspective to view people, which is particularly unbearable.”

“Some people are afraid of us. What are they afraid of? They are also human, and I am also human. Like in a bus, some people hide and look at us as soon as they see us. Everyone is actually no different; for example, when there are elderly people and children getting on the bus, we will also give up our seats.”

Similar experiences of prejudice and discrimination are faced by Uyghur Muslims in mainland cities. For instance, passengers on public transportation

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often exhibit unfriendly behavior. When Uyghur individuals board a bus, other passengers may move their belongings away or avoid placing them near where Uyghurs are standing. This behavior reflects an ingrained stereotype that unfairly labels Uyghurs as thieves, perpetuating discriminatory attitudes in everyday interactions.

In the realm of commerce, Uyghur street vendors frequently encounter challenges with urban management departments in cities like Beijing and Shanghai. Many of their business practices do not fully align with local policies and regulations, leading to preemptive actions by urban authorities. These actions often result in dissatisfaction and frustration among the vendors, further exacerbating tensions between the two parties.

The root of these conflicts is twofold. On one hand, vendors prioritize finding locations with higher foot traffic to maximize their income, often leading them to operate in areas not designated for street vending. This creates challenges for urban management, which seeks to maintain order in public spaces. On the other hand, language barriers and a lack of familiarity with relevant laws and regulations make it difficult for Uyghur vendors to comply with local requirements. Miscommunication between vendors and authorities often exacerbates these issues.

I recall a conversation in Nanjing with members of a mosque management committee, Sadi, where similar themes of misunderstanding and marginalization emerged:

“The Uyghur young man selling meat at the meat shop next to our mosque is very good. Sometimes we ask him to promote and explain harmonious management and relevant regulations in Uyghur language. Many new people are not familiar with the regulations and systems here. You need to patiently explain to them, and once they understand, they will gradually get used to it.”

The Uyghur community's struggles with language, cultural differences, and systemic biases highlight the need for improved communication, greater cultural sensitivity, and policies that facilitate rather than hinder their integration into urban life. These everyday experiences of prejudice and the systemic challenges Uyghur Muslims face emphasize the importance of addressing cultural divides and promoting mutual understanding to reduce discrimination and foster inclusivity in mainland cities.

The floating Uyghur Muslim population in mainland China often faces difficulties with limited external support, relying primarily on themselves or assistance from fellow villagers rather than seeking help from government departments. When asked how they resolve problems, nearly all respondents indicated a preference for self-reliance, with only a small percentage willing to seek help from fellow villagers or government agencies. This tendency reflects a significant level of dissatisfaction and distrust toward government institutions, which are often perceived as unresponsive or unsympathetic to their needs.

The relationship between Uyghur Muslims in other professions and citizens of cities like Beijing and Shanghai tends to be more harmonious compared to that of floating vendors. Language proficiency plays a crucial role in shaping these interactions. Uyghur Muslims with better Chinese communication skills generally experience smoother relations and improved living conditions in urban settings. Interestingly, some Uyghurs who are not fluent in Chinese report having learned basic English after moving to mainland China, which facilitates alternative forms of communication in certain situations.

Despite the challenges, many Uyghur Muslims maintain a positive overall impression of mainland citizens. Their struggles and living conditions have also elicited sympathy and support from some residents of cities like Beijing, who express compassion for the hardships faced by the floating Uyghur population. This highlights the potential for mutual understanding and solidarity when cultural and communication barriers are addressed.

Ultimately, improving communication skills and fostering trust between Uyghur Muslims, government agencies, and local communities are essential for enhancing integration and reducing the difficulties faced by this population in mainland cities.

For example, in Nanjing, the chef of a restaurant said:

“Besides renting a house, the locals don't have much to do with us because they don't speak the same language, and some of them are also quite interested in us. Han Chinese people have both advantages and disadvantages, and if they are not good to us, they are only a small group of people because there are differences in personal qualities, but the overall environment is still good.”

The language barrier significantly limits the interaction between Uyghur Muslims and Han Chinese, as well

as residents of cities like Beijing and Shanghai. This barrier, compounded by the discrimination faced by Uyghur Muslims, further restricts their social interactions, narrowing their range of interpersonal communication. Consequently, Uyghur Muslims often find themselves confined to small, insular social circles, primarily formed around kinship and hometown connections.

Among Uyghur Muslim small business owners, certain patterns are evident. These individuals typically have lower levels of formal education, poor Chinese proficiency, and a transient, guerrilla-style approach to earning a living by navigating various corners of the city. Their social networks are predominantly limited to groups formed through kinship ties or shared geographic origins. Most of their friends and business contacts emerge from these relationships. While some Uyghur Muslims acknowledge having friends outside their ethnic group or hometown, particularly Han Chinese acquaintances, these connections tend to be less frequent and lack the depth and intimacy of their kinship and hometown-based relationships.

Initially, when Uyghur Muslims arrive in mainland cities like Beijing and Shanghai, their social and business interactions rely heavily on their existing kinship and geographic networks. These ties form the foundation of their support system, helping them navigate unfamiliar environments. A distinctive feature of this community is their reliance on mosques when these primary networks fail to provide sufficient support. Mosques play a crucial role in meeting immediate needs, such as food and temporary housing. Over time, mosques also assist Uyghur Muslims in finding stable accommodations and opportunities to earn a livelihood. These religious spaces often become hubs where Uyghur newcomers meet fellow villagers and receive additional help, fostering a sense of community and solidarity.

As Uyghur Muslims spend more time in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, their social circles gradually expand beyond their original kinship and geographic relationships. They begin to form broader networks, increasing their range of interpersonal communication and integrating more effectively into urban life. This gradual broadening of social connections highlights the potential for Uyghur Muslims to overcome initial barriers and build more diverse and inclusive relationships, despite the challenges posed by language, discrimination, and cultural differences.

This evolution in their social interactions underscores the importance of creating inclusive spaces and opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, which can help Uyghur Muslims integrate more fully into mainland cities while preserving their cultural identity and community ties.

For example:

Q: Do you have any contact with other Muslims, such as the Hui ethnic group, who worship here every week?

A: It's impossible, unless you have good friends who used to know each other. There is very little interaction between Xinjiang people and Hui people, unless there is a real need for business. This can be observed carefully.

Q: What are your friends like?

A: All friends in Shanghai are from their hometown, and there are also non-Muslim Shanghai friends.

Q: How did your non-Muslim friends in Shanghai get to know each other?

A: Business acquaintances.

The social interactions of Uyghur Muslims in mainland cities like Beijing and Shanghai often vary depending on their background, education, and the length of their stay. For many, especially those engaged in small businesses, there is a noticeable reluctance to form friendships outside their own ethnic group. Their social networks remain confined to their immediate ethnic community, relying heavily on kinship ties or shared religious beliefs. This limited scope of interaction reflects both cultural preferences and practical constraints, such as language barriers and experiences of discrimination.

Small business owners, for example, typically have narrow social circles in these cities. They interact minimally with locals or members of other Muslim ethnic groups, such as the Hui. When challenges arise, they tend to depend on fellow believers within their community, avoiding the broader social relationships that might form in a more inclusive environment. Their social bonds rarely extend to meaningful friendships with people outside their ethnic or religious group.

In contrast, Uyghur elites who come to Shanghai and other cities for short-term study or extended work demonstrate a more expansive social range. Those who have lived and worked in these cities for over

three years, in particular, show greater adaptation to urban life. Their higher levels of education, stable careers, and familiarity with city dynamics enable them to establish connections beyond their ethnic or geographic origins. These individuals often develop diverse relationships through business, education, or professional environments, forming genuine friendships with people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The distinction between these two groups underscores the influence of socioeconomic status, education, and duration of residence on the social integration of Uyghur Muslims. While small business owners may remain confined to their traditional networks, educated and long-term residents gradually bridge cultural divides, creating opportunities for greater inclusion and mutual understanding in urban settings. This evolution highlights the potential for integration when structural and interpersonal barriers are addressed, allowing Uyghur Muslims to expand their social networks while maintaining their cultural identity.

3. Leisure Life

The leisure activities of Uyghur Muslims in mainland cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are often constrained by their difficult living conditions and narrow social networks. Based on my survey of floating vendors, it is evident that their daily lives leave little room for entertainment or relaxation. Most respondents stated that their limited free time is spent on basic activities such as sleeping or chatting with fellow villagers. This reflects both the demands of their work and the lack of accessible leisure options that resonate with their cultural preferences.

For many, language barriers further restrict their engagement with mainstream entertainment. Television, for example, is rarely watched because most programs are in Chinese, which they cannot understand. Instead, some individuals listen to Uyghur-language programs on the Central People's Broadcasting Station as a means of staying informed about external news and events. A few bring VCDs from their hometowns, watching videos in their native language during rare moments of downtime. Younger individuals often invest in portable radios or MP3 players, using these devices to listen to popular Uyghur or Central Asian music.

In certain areas, such as the Niujie Mosque in Beijing, Uyghur-language audio and video products are sold weekly, particularly on Jumu'ah (Friday). These items

are popular among the community, providing both entertainment and a connection to their cultural roots. Some younger Uyghurs also visit internet cafés to surf the web or play billiards at local pool halls. Social gatherings, though infrequent, occur during holidays or when a new arrival from their hometown joins the community. While these gatherings are a source of camaraderie, they can occasionally lead to misunderstandings or conflicts.

In Shanghai, a similar picture emerges. Uyghur Muslims in Shanghai lead challenging and frugal lives, with limited opportunities for leisure. Their daily schedules are dominated by business or employment responsibilities, leaving little time or energy for recreational activities. For those who own businesses and have access to a TV, leisure might include watching cultural or entertainment programs, though movies and dramas in Chinese or English remain inaccessible due to language barriers.

Vendors in shops often play Xinjiang folk or ethnic music during downtime, with employees sometimes humming or moving along to the tunes.

More structured leisure activities, such as reading books or engaging in sports, are rare luxuries. However, occasional instances of physical recreation do occur. For example, I encountered a self-employed vendor who, along with his employees, took breaks to play basketball. This case highlights how leisure activities, though infrequent, can still provide moments of relaxation and connection for Uyghur Muslims in cities like Shanghai.

Overall, the leisure lives of Uyghur Muslims are shaped by their challenging circumstances, cultural preferences, and limited resources. While they find small ways to connect with their heritage and unwind, significant barriers—such as language, time, and access—restrict their ability to engage in a wider variety of recreational activities. These constraints underline the need for more inclusive leisure opportunities that acknowledge and support the unique cultural and social needs of this community.

Q&A Section

Q: Besides doing homework, what other leisure activities do you have? Just now I heard your wife say you went to play ball?

A: Yes.

Q: Who do you play with?

A: I play with people from my hometown and local students.

Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic groups from Xinjiang residing in Shanghai face significant constraints on their leisure activities due to their focus on earning a livelihood and the financial limitations of their circumstances. Most individuals spend their days occupied with work, leaving little time for social visits or recreational outings. Social interaction outside of work is typically reserved for specific occasions, such as community gatherings or major Muslim festivals. Beyond these events, visiting relatives and friends is uncommon, as many consider it impractical or burdensome given their busy schedules and tight resources.

Some individuals express a desire to explore Shanghai's iconic scenic spots and cultural landmarks, which represent a source of curiosity and a potential break from their daily routines. However, financial constraints often prevent them from pursuing these activities, leaving them with limited options for leisure. As a result, many spend their free time at home or within the confines of their shops, reinforcing the sense of isolation and monotony in their daily lives.

4. Issues in Social Life

Inconvenience in Applying for Passports, Temporary Residence Permits, and Other Certificates Uyghur Muslims in mainland cities such as Beijing and Shanghai face significant challenges in obtaining essential documents, such as temporary residence permits, passports, and business licenses. For many, the process of applying for temporary residence permits is fraught with obstacles. Community members report widespread rejection of their applications, with some being explicitly told that Uyghurs are not eligible to apply. This exclusion disproportionately affects Uyghur Muslims engaged in small businesses, auto trading, and commodity trading, as the lack of a temporary residence permit restricts their ability to complete essential business procedures and obtain necessary documentation.

These challenges have intensified following incidents like the July 5th Incident (2009 Urumqi riots), which led to heightened scrutiny and restrictions for Uyghur citizens. Many have encountered difficulties in applying for passports and business licenses, with increased bureaucratic hurdles imposed on their access to these essential documents.

4.1 Heightened Surveillance before Major Events

The Uyghur Muslim floating population often faces additional scrutiny and exclusion before major

national or international events. For example, during the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Uyghurs were subjected to heightened monitoring by public security departments. Community members reported that Uyghurs undergoing security checks at airports were subjected to more rigorous and intrusive procedures than individuals from other ethnic groups.

Similar patterns emerge before other significant events, such as the World Expo in Shanghai. Uyghur residents in Shanghai recounted being asked to leave the city as the event approached, highlighting the systemic exclusion they face during periods of heightened security and international attention.

Even community social work volunteers, who typically operate with a degree of autonomy, experience restrictions during these periods. Workplaces and organizations focused on Uyghur health and welfare frequently receive unannounced visits from government officials, who inquire about their activities. These disruptions hinder the efforts of community groups and reinforce the perception that Uyghur populations are being unfairly targeted.

4.2 Broader Implications

The difficulties faced by Uyghur Muslims in obtaining essential documents and their treatment during major events reflect systemic discrimination and marginalization. The inability to secure temporary residence permits or business licenses not only limits their economic opportunities but also undermines their ability to participate fully in urban life. The heightened surveillance and exclusion before major events further exacerbate feelings of alienation and distrust between Uyghur communities and the broader society.

Addressing these issues requires concerted efforts to ensure equitable access to documentation and equal treatment under the law. Policies and practices that disproportionately target Uyghur Muslims need to be reevaluated to foster a more inclusive and fair environment, allowing all citizens to participate in economic and social life without undue barriers or prejudice.

4.3 Health Issues

Uyghur Muslim populations in cities like Beijing and Shanghai face significant health challenges due to precarious living conditions, economic instability, and limited access to healthcare. Many lack stable employment, and some engage in drug use and trafficking, contributing to a high HIV/AIDS

infection rate and posing public safety risks. Common diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, and influenza are widespread, exacerbated by overcrowded housing, poor sanitation, and reliance on shared public spaces like internet cafés and saunas. During winter, influenza outbreaks are severe, affecting almost all community members, including vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and individuals with HIV/AIDS or chronic illnesses. Poor nutrition and inadequate healthcare access further worsen these conditions. Addressing these health issues requires improved healthcare access, better living conditions, targeted public health interventions, and support for vulnerable groups to break the cycle of poor health and social marginalization.

4.4 Linguistic Barriers, Cultural Differences, and Discrimination

Uyghur Muslims face significant challenges when attempting to stay in hotels in mainland cities such as Beijing. These difficulties stem from a combination of linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and deeply ingrained prejudice and discrimination. The inability to effectively communicate with Han Chinese, coupled with public stereotypes and biases, often leads to landlords and hotel management discriminating against Uyghur tenants and guests. Furthermore, large-scale urban redevelopment projects, such as the demolition of urban villages, exacerbate the issue by reducing available housing options and pushing Uyghur residents into more precarious living situations.

The issue extends beyond housing rentals and affects hotel accommodations as well. Many hotels explicitly

refuse to provide services to Uyghur Muslims, citing various reasons that are often tied to discriminatory practices or directives from authorities. A survey conducted by the Beijing Aizhixing Research Institute sheds light on this problem. The institute surveyed 20 hotels and guesthouses across Haidian District, Shijingshan District, Fengtai District, and Xuanwu District of Beijing. The results revealed that only 8 of these establishments accepted Uyghur guests, meaning 60% of the surveyed hotels refused service to them.

Even among the hotels that permitted Uyghur Muslims to stay, the attitudes of the staff varied significantly. Only the staff of a five-star hotel responded confidently and without hesitation, while others exhibited hesitation and careful consideration before answering. Additionally, several hotels that claimed to allow Uyghur guests imposed additional requirements, such as being prepared for background checks or investigations. Hotel staff often justified these actions by citing directives from higher authorities, further illustrating the systemic nature of the issue.

These discriminatory practices place Uyghur Muslims in an especially vulnerable position when traveling or seeking temporary accommodations in mainland cities. The inability to access hotels not only limits their mobility but also reinforces social and economic exclusion. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy interventions to combat prejudice, ensure equal access to public accommodations, and uphold the rights of Uyghur Muslims as equal members of society.

Survey on Attitudes towards Uyghur Occupation in Beijing Hotels/Resorts¹

Hotel Number	Can Check-in	Reason or No Reason
1	No	Reason: Due to being from Xinjiang, we are unable to move in. Previously, it was mentioned that we would not be allowed to stay, so we cannot. The attitude was good, and they indicated that it is possible to register with a Han Chinese ID card.
2	No	Reason: Not explained. This is a very cheap hotel, with each bed costing only 15 yuan. The attitude was quite stiff.
3	Yes	—
4	No	Reason: Regulations from higher authorities. Attitude: Very good.
5	No	Reason: Regulations from higher authorities. Attitude: Very good. Can stay, but must register at the police station. It is a state-owned hotel with regulations.
6	Yes	—
7	Yes	—

¹Beijing Aizhixing Research Institute, "Report on the Health, Residential and Other Human Rights Situation of Uyghur Floating Population in Cities – Taking the Floating Uyghur Ethnic Group in Beijing as an Example", April 2010. (<http://www.aizhi.org/view.php?id=595>) 北京爱知行研究所·《维吾尔流动人口在城市中的健康、居住及其他人权状况报告-以北京市的流动维吾尔族为例》·2010年4月。(http://www.aizhi.org/view.php?id=595)

Hotel Number	Can Check-in	Reason or No Reason
8	No	Attitude was very good, but check-in was not allowed. The reason was given by the police station.
9	No	Due to ongoing investigations, guests cannot be accepted. Accepting them poses a risk.
10	No	Daily reporting is now required, and inspections are very strict. Han people from Xinjiang can check in.
11	No	No scanner is available. Xinjiang people must go to designated hotels.
12	No	It becomes troublesome as someone comes to inspect once you check in.
13	Yes	As long as police inspections are passed, there is no problem. Still, living there is very troublesome.
14	No	No rooms available. It is worth noting this is a Hui ethnic hotel.
15	No	Not accepted. Recommended to go to the Kashgar or Xinjiang office. This is also a Hui ethnic hotel.
16	Yes	Not accepted. Recommended to go to the Kashgar or Xinjiang office. This is also a Hui ethnic hotel. Police will definitely investigate.
17	Yes	–
18	No	Investigations have been very strict lately. We cannot stay.
19	Yes	Daily accommodation fee of 1,500 yuan.
20	Yes	–

4.5 Analysis

The housing difficulties faced by Uyghur Muslims in mainland China are deeply rooted in cultural, social, and systemic factors. These challenges have been exacerbated by discriminatory practices, institutional biases, and the lack of enforcement of legal protections. Based on analysis and long-term observation, the following factors contribute to the housing challenges faced by Uyghur Muslims:

5. Conclusion

1. Cultural Differences:

Uyghur Muslims face cultural barriers that hinder integration into Han-dominated communities. Landlords and neighbors often cite concerns about lifestyle differences as reasons for refusing to rent to Uyghurs. For example, some community members expressed that while they are not inherently unwilling to rent to Uyghurs, they fear disturbances due to cultural practices, such as a preference for lively gatherings at night. Language barriers also make communication difficult, and divergent living habits can lead to misunderstandings and discomfort among neighbors.

2. Stereotypes and Prejudice:

A significant factor contributing to housing discrimination is the prevalence of negative stereotypes about Uyghurs. Due to the actions of a small minority involved in illegal activities, the entire Uyghur community is often unfairly stigmatized. Police frequently conduct checks and inquiries targeting Uyghur residents under the

guise of public security, reinforcing the perception among locals that Uyghurs are associated with criminal behavior. While it is true that some individuals have engaged in unlawful activities, generalizing this to the entire Uyghur population perpetuates harmful biases and alienation.

3. Influence of Government and Public Security:

Government policies and public security actions significantly affect Uyghurs' ability to secure housing. Following incidents such as the July 5th Incident, public security departments have treated Uyghur residents as key subjects of "stability maintenance." Local authorities often adopt an unwelcoming stance and explicitly instruct landlords not to rent to Uyghurs. Many landlords report being directly approached by local police, who warn them against renting to Uyghur tenants. This creates a hostile environment, as landlords fear repercussions for non-compliance.

4. Legal Context and Violations:

Despite the challenges faced by Uyghurs, Chinese law explicitly prohibits such discriminatory practices. For instance, the Ministry of Public Security's 2002 "Notice on Correcting the Refusal of Guesthouses, Hotels, and Hostels to Accommodate Ethnic Groups" declared that denying accommodations to residents of Xinjiang, including Uyghurs, is illegal. The notice pointed out that these practices violate the principles of ethnic unity, infringe on legitimate rights, and cause dissatisfaction among affected groups. Similarly, transportation providers are prohibited from refusing services based on ethnicity.

However, in reality, these laws are not effectively enforced. Uyghur Muslims continue to face widespread housing discrimination in violation of national laws and policies promoting ethnic harmony and equality.

Recommendations

The systemic housing difficulties faced by Uyghur Muslims stem from cultural misunderstandings, ingrained stereotypes, and institutional biases. These issues are compounded by the ineffective enforcement of existing anti-discrimination laws. Addressing these problems requires a multifaceted approach: public education to counter stereotypes, stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation, and governmental

efforts to promote inclusivity and respect for cultural diversity. Without such measures, Uyghur Muslims will continue to face significant obstacles in securing stable and dignified housing in mainland cities.

6. References

1. Beijing Aizhixing Research Institute, "Report on the Health, Residential and Other Human Rights Situation of Uyghur Floating Population in Cities – Taking the Floating Uyghur Ethnic Group in Beijing as an Example", April 2010. (<http://www.aizhi.org/view.php?id=595>) 北京爱知行研究所·《维吾尔流动人口在城市中的健康、居住及其他人权状况报告-以北京市的流动维吾尔族为例》, 2010 年 4 月。(<http://www.aizhi.org/view.php?id=595>)