

Location: A 1987 study listed 25,000 speakers of the Lop Nur Uyğur language in the eastern part of the Xinjiang Uyğur Autonomous Region.¹ They live near Lop Nur Lake, in a widespread area which includes Yuli County and Miran Township of Ruoqiang County. The area is also near the site of China’s nuclear bomb tests. Marco Polo described his travels through the Lop region more than 700 years ago: “At the point where the traveler enters the Great Desert, is a big city called Lop... I can tell you that travelers who intend to cross the desert rest in this town for a week to refresh themselves and their beasts. At the end of the week they stock up with a month’s provisions for themselves and their beasts. Then they leave the town and enter the desert.”²

Identity: Although the Lop Nur people have been officially included as part of the Uyğur nationality, “they differ from the Uyğur people in both language and appearance — looking more like Mongolians.”³

Language: Most Chinese sources list Lop Nur as a dialect of Uyğur, but it is not intelligible with any other Turkic varieties within China.

History: The Lop Nur Uyğurs are “believed to be descended from the ancient Loulan people.... Their ancestors all lived at Lop Nur and were engaged in fishing and hunting.... When Lop Nur dried up several decades ago, they were forced to move and settle down in Miran.”⁴

When Marco Polo visited the ancient city of Lop, now buried deep beneath the sand, he noted, “There are many springs of bad and bitter water, though in some places the water is good and sweet. When it happens that an army passes through the country, if it is a hostile one, the people take flight with their wives and children and their beasts two or three days’ journey into the sandy wastes to places where they know there is water and they can live with their beasts.”⁵

Customs: Seven centuries ago, Marco Polo described the effect the Taklimakan Desert had on stray travelers. “When a man is riding by night through the desert and something happens to make him loiter and lose touch with his companions... he hears spirits talking in such a way that they seem to be his companions. Sometimes, indeed, they even hail him by name. Often these voices make him stray from the path, so that he never finds it again. And in this way many travelers have been lost and have perished.”⁶

Religion: The Lop Nur Uyğurs converted to Islam several centuries



Dwayne Graybill

ago. They retain many features of their pre-Islamic spirit-appeasement rituals, including the worship of the sun, moon, stars, and wind.

Christianity: There is no apparent Christian presence among the people living in the desolate wastes of the Lop Nur region. Nestorian missionaries from the eighth to thirteenth centuries established churches along the Silk Road townships, but all memory of them and their message has long since been obliterated by the all-encompassing sands of the Taklimakan Desert.



Population in China:
 25,000 (1987)
 33,500 (2000)
 42,200 (2010)
Location: Xinjiang
Religion: Islam
Christians: None Known

Overview of the Lop Nur Uyğur

Countries: China
Pronunciation: “Lop-noor-Wee-gur”
Other Names: Lop Nur Turks, Lop Nur
Population Source: 25,000 (1987 LAC); Out of a total Uyğur population of 7,214,431 (1990 census)
Location: *E Xinjiang:* Lop Nur Region; Yuli County, and Miran Township of Ruoqiang County

Status: Officially included under Uyğur
Language: Altaic, Turkic, Eastern Turkic
Dialects: 0
Religion: Sunni Islam, Polytheism
Christians: None known
Scripture: None
Jesus film: None
Gospel Recordings: None
Christian Broadcasting: None
ROPAL code: UIG03

