

Analysis of the Uyghur Cultural Genocide

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ABSTRACT

Despite the news coverage about the Uyghurs, there is limited information about historical events that shaped the Uyghur cultural genocide and how the crisis fits into the broader scope of ethnic minorities in China. This paper examines the role of Han Chinese ethnocentrism in the Chinese government's treatment of the Uyghurs. The Uyghurs have experienced an eradication of their way of life and evaluation of evidence from personal correspondence, diaries, speeches, and other primary and secondary sources, assists in deepening understanding of the genocide. Although the oppression is rooted in key events in the twentieth century, it was challenging to find primary sources due to CCP censorship and many documents written in Mandarin. Nevertheless, extensive research led to useful sources for analysis. The Uyghur cultural genocide is an important topic to study as it is a human rights crisis that continues to unfold today. "If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success."ⁱ Confucius, *The Analects*, Book 13, Verse 3, ca. 500 B.C.E

Introduction

The population of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is 92 percent Han Chinese and the remaining 8 percent is made up of 55 official ethnic minorities. However, in 1954, when the PRC conducted a census and asked about ethnicity, over 400 groups applied for classification proving that China is diverse and composed of many unrecognized ethnic groups.ⁱⁱ Throughout the country's history, China has vacillated between operating as a multiethnic civilization that recognizes minorities and gives them autonomy, and a monoethnic authority that oppresses and assimilates them into the dominant Han majority. Being Chinese has largely been a political construct.

In the 19th century, Chinese civilization was ravaged by imperialism, shaping a desire for self-determination and a unified state. As China transformed into a modern state, the government's *modus operandi* was to treat ethnicities in the optimal way that served the state—prioritizing the state's power and control above all. Under Mao Zedong's leadership beginning in 1949, the government assumed an egalitarian approach to mobilize support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, an economic crisis ensued and prompted Mao to alter his approach; he eliminated the "old" through the Cultural Revolution, which involved purging and ethnic violence. A backlash to the repression ensued, and after Mao died and the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the government assumed a more tolerant approach towards minorities as China focused on economic development and moving to a free-market economy under Deng Xiaoping and subsequent leaders. Deng saw the value of purporting a multiethnic state while maintaining nationalist sentiment. The Chinese government, paradoxically, both embraced and suppressed ethnic nationalism to consolidate power. As it continued its evolution from a state to a nation-state that shared a common Han culture and became hyper nationalistic, the government required citizens to believe in the superiority of Han as an ethnicity and pledge full allegiance to the state first and foremost. Han Chinese ethnocentrism became an advantageous tool for the Chinese government to preserve and grow state power by marginalizing ethnic minorities, such as the Uyghurs, and has consequently led to a Uyghur cultural genocide.

Xinjiang's Allure

Xinjiang, in Northwest China where the Uyghurs reside, is abundant in natural resources. Xinjiang has the country's largest oil and mineral reserves and is home to China's largest coal and natural gas reserves.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, the region is geographically important to China because it is located in the Northwest area bordering eight countries such as former Soviet republics, India, and Pakistan, among others, and thus strategic for trade and national security. Xinjiang is where the ancient Silk Road connected China to the rest of the world.

Historical Background

Historically, China was a collection of many different lands with a diverse set of peoples. Uyghurs, Mongolians, Tibetans, and Han Chinese were a few of the groups that made up the population of China. The Uyghurs lived in northwest China since the Great Migration, which began in the 6th century. The Uyghurs descended from nomads, merchants, and Arab traders that traversed the Silk Road. This combination of cultures led to a unique culture.^{iv} In terms of culture and language, the Uyghurs are more similar to the peoples of Central Asia than to the Han.^v By the 11th century, Islam had become the principal religion in the region as opposed to Buddhism which dominated elsewhere.^{vi} In the 16th century, Uyghurs in positions of leadership established a set of Islamic city-states, which became known as East Turkestan. The Qing Dynasty period, which lasted from 1644 through 1911, marked a period of significant population growth and territorial expansion.^{vii} The Qing doubled the amount of territory under the control of the emperor in Beijing, and in order to conquer successfully, the Qing rulers had to allow for ethnic autonomy.

During the eighteenth century, Muslim populations living in Northwest China clashed with the Qing rulers and revolted on numerous occasions as the state attempted to exert more control over lands where Muslims lived. Many revolts were staged in opposition to the influx of migrants, who were coming from the overpopulated regions of China to regions that had not previously been under direct Chinese control.^{viii} These revolts were violently suppressed by the state, ending a period of compromise for Muslims in China.^{ix} For a brief period after 1864, the region broke away from the Qing Dynasty while China was involved with other conflicts. However, the Chinese government regained control in 1877, and in doing so, restored Chinese control.^x In 1884, this new region was formally renamed Xinjiang.^{xi} Eventually, in 1911, the Qing Dynasty collapsed after almost 300 years of being in power. Several Uyghur leaders led the successful creation of independent Muslim republics in western China.^{xii}

As Xinjiang means 'new frontier' in Mandarin, it counters China's claims of historical domination.^{xiii} China asserts that Xinjiang has been part of China for 2,000 years but historiography shows the constant flow of peoples and cultures into and out of Xinjiang, and demonstrates that the current Chinese dominance in Xinjiang began in the eighteenth-century when the Qing Dynasty conquered Xinjiang.^{xiv}

After the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1911, the founders of the new Republic of China (1911-1949) struggled to reconcile Han nationalism with China's multiethnic history.^{xv} They realized the contradiction between Han nationalism and the ambition to keep all of the Qing territories, which included ethnic minorities in the frontier areas.^{xvi} There existed a disconnect between the notion of a uniform state entirely composed of Han Chinese versus a diverse nation where numerous ethnic minorities could thrive.

The founder of the new Chinese Republic was Sun Yat-sen, who served as the first president of this new regime and the first leader of the Nationalist Party of China, the Kuomintang (KMT). Sun Yat-sen posed two conflicting ideals. To start, he was one of the first people to imagine China as a multiethnic nation. He believed that it was vital for ethnic minorities such as Tibetans and Mongolians to be integrated and assimilated into the larger majority of Han people.^{xvii} This is because Sun Yat-sen thought that regardless of what minority one was part of, they were all still part of a single line of ancestry that had gone askew throughout history. It

was not until Sun Yat-sen that “Han nationalism” became synonymous with the Chinese state.^{xxviii} He believed that the only way for China to reach its full potential as a global superpower was for it to embrace a sense of Han nationalism. According to Sun Yat-sen “if we do not earnestly promote nationalism and weld together our four hundred millions into a strong nation, we face a tragedy – the loss of our country and the destruction of our race.”^{xxix} Sun Yat-sen believed that nationalism would help unite and mobilize China against foreign enemies and help them rise to prominence on the global stage.

The reality was that Sun needed support of the ethnic minorities at the borders and for practical matters, he needed to promote a multiethnic nation-state to retain control. When the Republic of China was established in 1912, Sun Yat-sen said “a republic has been established, and our compatriots in Mongolia, Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang, who have always been a part of China, are all now Chinese citizens who are masters of their country.”^{xxx} However, Han Chinese leaders in the Republican period already had an agenda of assimilation—they removed Ural-Altaic names from the Xinjiang map and replaced them with Han names.^{xxxi} As a result of Han nationalism, the Uyghurs were relegated to the margins. The Uyghurs faced increasing amounts of discrimination, as the government incessantly tried to strip their culture away from them. The founding of the Eastern Turkestan Republic (ETR) in 1933 reflected the strengthening of the Uyghur national identity and the resistance to the repression of the Han.^{xxxii} The oppression the Uyghurs faced can be attributed to Sun Yat-sen’s influence on the policy of the Chinese government, despite his initial vision of a multiethnic state.

Following the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925, a new leader of the KMT emerged: Chiang Kai-shek. In addition to dealing with the Japanese invasion between 1927 and 1949, China was engaged in a long and bloody Civil War. On one side was the Kuomintang Party of the Republic of China (KMT), and on the other side was the CCP. He continued to push for the same types of policies for which Sun Yat-sen had advocated—Chiang envisioned a Republic that was built on the ideals of Han nationalism. The CCP, on the other hand, was spearheaded by Mao Zedong and was focused on equality. Mao’s ultimate objective was to overthrow the KMT through a Civil War and to establish his own regime. After many years of fighting, Mao was successful—in 1949, Chiang fled to Taiwan and Mao was declared the leader of China.^{xxxiii}

To garner support from ethnic minorities, the CCP promised the freedom of choice to join China or to form independent states.^{xxxiv} The Uyghurs likely believed in Mao’s assurances that minorities would be protected under Communism.^{xxxv} Uyghur leader, Abdulkerim Abbas, expressed his support by saying:

We categorically assert that the success of the People's Liberation Army alone rendered possible the victory of our own movement . . . Only the victory of the national liberation struggle of the entire Chinese people can lead to the full freedom of the people of Xinjiang; only then will the correct solution of the national question in Xinjiang be reached.^{xxxvi}

As a result, the CCP had the advantage in taking over Xinjiang.

CCP, Mao, and Socialism

When Mao became the leader of China, he immediately pushed for and advocated for socialist ideals. Socialism promotes equality and for economic and social disparities to be eliminated. Therefore, during the brief period when Mao first came into power, he made an effort to include ethnic minorities and to treat them as equals to Han people to mobilize support for his political regime. The early Chinese communists resisted Chiang Kai-shek’s monoethnic construction, and instead rallied around a vision of China as an amalgamation of politically and economically equal ethnic groups, basing their view on the Soviet Union paradigm.^{xxxvii} In other words, Mao’s policies directly contradicted Chiang’s beliefs of Han nationalism and instead promoted equity for ethnic minorities in the PRC: the policies and regulations of the Communist Party toward minorities were based on the idea that everyone was equal regardless of their ethnicity or race. Minorities should be allowed to express their culture without fear of government intervention as long as the minorities were striving toward the national goal of a united China. Autonomous regions were created to protect minorities and give them control over their

areas.^{xxviii} However, the pretense of equality hid ulterior motives. The Communists believed that racism was a byproduct of class struggle.^{xxix} Thus, by promoting equality, they were essentially claiming that communism had succeeded. The PRC also may have wanted to make an effort to recognize the diverse ethnic minorities in order to not look like an “evil colonialist.”^{xxx} Recognizing minorities could help China with regard to foreign powers being more moderate in their affairs with China in the economic and political arenas. In fact, in his speech entitled *On the Ten Major Relationships*, Mao stated:

We say China is a country vast in territory, rich in resources and large in population; as a matter of fact, it is the Han nationality whose population is large and the minority nationalities whose territory is vast and whose resources are rich, or at least in all probability their resources under the soil are rich... We must foster good relations between the Han nationality and the minority nationalities and strengthen the unity of all the nationalities in the common endeavour to build our great socialist motherland^{xxxi}

Mao emphasized that the minorities resources were “rich,” shedding light on the importance of minorities in China and their contributions to the nation. However, the CCP made a complete turn and began to suppress ethnic nationalism and promote the notion of a unitary, multiethnic nation-state as it realized the strategic importance of ethnic minority areas, which amounted to about 64 percent of China’s territory.^{xxxii} Again, the focus shifted to retaining CCP power by strengthening the state. The CCP assumed a multiethnic approach to defeat the KMT and now they needed a more unified approach to take more absolute control. After the creation of the PRC, the Communist Party adopted Sun Yat-sen’s vision of Han dominance and his policies toward ethnic minorities. The successors to Sun’s nationalist vision for China were the leaders of the CCP. Inspired by Sun Yat-sen’s set of beliefs, the CCP attempted to create a unified nation-state dominated by the Han people.

The PRC government promoted Han nationalism that started in Beijing and spread rapidly to regions like Xinjiang. To physically control and extend political jurisdiction over all frontier areas, the CCP moved swiftly to integrate ethnic minority communities into the structure of the communist state by adopting a variety of measures. CCP initiatives included the massive migration of Han people to ethnic minority areas, the recruitment of ethnic minorities into the party and government, and the inducing of minorities to learn the Han language and culture.^{xxxv} The Chinese government encouraged the Han to settle in Xinjiang. In 1949, the Han Chinese made up just 6.7 percent of the region’s population, and that number increased to 41.6 percent in 1978. The Han Chinese grew to prominence in the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century; however, it was at the expense of China’s minorities, especially the Uyghurs. In the 1940s, there was a brief independence for the Uyghurs. The independent government was the second Eastern Turkestan Republic (ETR) and lasted from 1944-1949 and was led by its President, Ehmetjan Qasimi. In a telegram on August 18, 1949, Mao invited Qasimi to discuss the relationship between the Uyghurs and Beijing and the CCP. Mao stated:

The struggle that you have been engaged in for many years is a part of the people’s democratic revolutionary movement in China as a whole. As a result of the victorious development of the war of liberation of the peoples of the Northwest, the day of liberation for all of Xinjiang is close at hand. Your struggle will thus achieve final victory. We wholeheartedly welcome your five representatives to participate in the plenary meeting of the People’s Political Consultative Conference.^{xxxvii}

However, Qasimi and eight of the ETR leaders were killed in a plane crash on the way to attend the People’s Political Consultative Conference on August 27, 1949. The ETR was consumed by the CCP and Xinjiang came under their control. In a telegram to Peng Dehuai, commander and political commissar of the First Field Army, on September 26, 1949, Mao said “The key to resolving the Xinjiang problem is to closely cooperate with the Uyghur nationality. Based on this, we can force the Guomintang to give up.”^{xxxviii} He went on to say that in the provincial government, the “Han Chinese should occupy the minority, with Uyghurs and people from other nationalities occupying the majority (Bao Erhan’s provincial government currently consists of ten Han Chinese and fifteen Uyghurs. We should not change this proportion when entering Xinjiang).”^{xxxix} However, after Mao and the CCP had defeated the KMT, the CCP once again moved to repression to exert state

control. The CCP established a unit called the *bingtuan* to establish and maintain CCP control in the region, and it was full of ex-PLA (People's Liberation Army) soldiers.^{xi} A formal phase of militancy began in Xinjiang. On October 1, 1955, Xinjiang became the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).^{xii}

Cultural Revolution

The treatment of minorities and Mao's perception of diversity was completely transformed during the Cultural Revolution in China between 1966 and 1976. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's objectives shifted. Mao blamed China's economic troubles on the connection to its past. He wanted to get rid of the "The Four Olds" of ideas, culture, customs, and habits. Instead of a focus on "celebrating China's ethnic diversity," the primary goal was one of "assimilation."^{xiii} The PRC started to devalue diversity, and instead intended to create a uniform state that solely embraced Han ideals. Assimilation also entailed the destruction and disapproval of belief systems that were not directly in line with Han culture. Mao's followers and an array of extremists attacked many aspects of non-Han minority communities and cultures - everything from language to architecture to religion were targets.^{xiiii} The Red Guards, a militant student group, was one of the groups that led the purging and ethnic violence. In their battle song, the Red Guards cried "We are Chairman Mao's Red Guards, vanguards of the cultural revolution. We unite with the masses and together plunge into the battle to wipe out all monsters and demons."^{xlv} In particular, there was intense discrimination directed against Muslims. An excerpt from the September 20, 1966 diary entry of Söyüngül Chanisheff, a Uyghur who was imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution and who published her memoir *The Land Drenched in Tears* stated that a citizen soldier said to her "You silly, backward people, ignorant of the glorious social changes in this country. You are no longer allowed to hold onto your traditional beliefs. You can say no today, but just wait and see: the Party will soon forbid you to wear even your own traditional clothes, let alone have your traditional way of life and your religion."^{xlvi} The intense purging permeated Xinjiang and Chanisheff recounts "There were mass shootings of Uyghurs by government forces in the 1960s; there were piles of bodies, blood everywhere, people frantically searching for relatives and the subsequent scooping up of the dead and injured so that the area could be hosed down and returned to its pristine, pre-massacre state."^{xlvi} The Cultural Revolution further negatively impacted Uyghurs living in China. Chanisheff concludes "In another thirty or forty years time, we will become the minority in Xinjiang and our land will be occupied and controlled by the Chinese." "What can we do? What's going to happen to future generations if things continue like this?"^{xlvii} While the foundation for a Uyghur cultural genocide was laid during the Cultural Revolution, the 1970s and 1980s provided a short leveling off of the extreme repression.

A Brief Period of Relative Stability

Mao's death in 1976 forced an ideological reckoning, however. The Communist Party, which was led by the new leader of China, Deng Xiaoping, adopted new policies that were more tolerant towards minorities—especially Muslims. Deng wanted to restore stability at home after the repressive assimilation and damage of the Cultural Revolution. Deng's primary focus was on opening up China's economy and stimulating growth as well as promoting unity. Deng noted "Without the economy, the policy of ethnic autonomous rule is empty."^{xlviii} Thus he advocated for "multiculturalism" and "ethnic diversity."^{xlix} The latter part of the 1970s, as well as the 1980s, serve as an example of a time period where multiculturalism and ethnic diversity lived alongside Han nationalism. There were some riots and resistance due to Han migration, but this contradicts many other time periods throughout Chinese history and was a time when minorities, such as Uyghurs, were not under as harsh of a rule. Uyghurs embraced their own form of ethnic nationalism. As a result, by the late 1980s, tensions

mounted and the *bingtuan* was implemented again prompting additional social and economic disparities between the Han and Uyghurs.

Collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 primarily impacted countries that were part of the USSR, this political change had an indelible effect on China's policies and on minorities within the PRC's borders. As a result of the disintegration of the USSR, nationalism spread, the effects of discrimination against minorities were amplified, and economic challenges surfaced. Following the collapse, Turkic people in Central Asia formed independent states in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.ⁱ As China emerged from the Cultural Revolution, the CCP worked to consolidate power while nationalism brewed within minority groups including the Uyghurs. There was an upsurge of resistance which government officials in Beijing viewed as a threat to their regime and the power of the CCP. The government cracked down on Xinjiang and the Uyghurs—minorities in Xinjiang were oppressed through cruel and extreme methods.

Strike Hard Campaign

National unity was jeopardized by several minority independence movements, notably those of the Uyghurs and the Tibetans.ⁱⁱ Han nationalism came into play with regard to Beijing's fear of these independence movements. In 1992, Uyghur radicals detonated several bombs in Xinjiang. Following these events, the Strike Hard Campaign was launched by the mid-1990s, reinforcing the CCP's authoritarian ideals. Anyone who was believed to support the Uyghurs' cause in any way could be imprisoned.ⁱⁱⁱ The Strike Hard campaign brought violence and frequent conflict between Han Chinese and Uyghurs, particularly in the Southern part of Xinjiang. The Strike Hard Campaign did not solely have an internal effect on China, however. Many foreign nations saw the Strike Hard Campaign and suspected China of human rights abuses, raising concern and shaping foreign policy towards China in the following years. The Strike Hard Campaign further demonstrated the idea that, in certain instances, the Chinese government was not afraid to use repressive tactics to obtain what they desire—a unified China.

Global War on Terror and Turning Point

The tensions between the Uyghurs (as well as other ethnic minorities) and Han Chinese only escalated. After September 11, 2001, the Uyghurs were persecuted because of both Han nationalism as well as an increase in Islamophobic sentiments. On September 20, 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush stated that “this is not, however, just America's fight...this is the world's fight...we ask every nation to join us.” He went on to warn that any nation that harbors or supports terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime. Bush effectively activated the Global War on Terror.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Although he warned against it, counter-terrorism ensued in China and especially with regard to the Uyghurs despite there being limited evidence “that more than a few hundred Uyghurs, if that many, ever had any connection with Al Qaeda or the Taliban.”^{lv} Tensions reached a high point in 2009. In July 2009, Uyghur protests in the regional capital, Urumqi, broke out. Protesters were angry because of the state-incentivized Han Chinese migration into the region and widespread economic and cultural discrimination. Nearly two hundred people were killed. Thousands of Uyghurs were detained, and some of them were executed. From Beijing's perspective, all Uyghurs could potentially be terrorists.^{lv} During the next few years, authorities blamed Uyghurs for attacks at a local government office, a train station, an open-air market, as well as Tiananmen Square in Beijing.^{lvi} The 2009 event was a critical point in the Communist Party's attitude and behavior towards the Uyghurs.^{lvii} After the ethnic riots in 2009, the CCP increased restrictions on

Uyghurs and limited their freedom. Job discrimination, land seizures, and government control over religion led to protests and violent repression.^{lviii} Ironically, in September 2009, in the PRC State Council White Paper, the government described the ethnic policy as featuring “equality, unity, regional ethnic autonomy, and common prosperity for all ethnic groups,” and proceeded to say that the ethnic policy was “in line with China’s actual situation” and “fostered the unity and harmonious coexistence of all ethnic groups who are striving with one mind for economic development, political stability, cultural prosperity and social harmony.”^{lix} Beijing’s positioning reflected a complete disconnect with the reality of extreme repression and a manipulation of public opinion.

Recent Tensions

The violence and tensions between the Uyghurs and Han persisted into the 2010s. In particular, the number of violent crimes directed at Han civilians that were carried out by Uyghurs escalated tension to an even higher degree. During this time period, some violent incidents began to resemble what might be categorized as terrorism.^{lx} The Chinese government used this as a justification for its poor treatment of the Uyghurs. The government declared a “People’s War on Terror,” which gave way to a massive internment program directed toward all the Muslims in Xinjiang —15 million people.^{lxi} In 2012, Rahile Dawut, a Uyghur anthropologist who was imprisoned said “If one were to remove these ... shrines, the Uighur people would lose contact with earth. They would no longer have a personal, cultural, and spiritual history. After a few years we would not have a memory of why we live here or where we belong.”^{lxii}

In 2017, the Chinese government began to intensify its campaign against the Uyghurs, and began to further stress a process of forced assimilation. The process of stripping the Uyghurs of any facets of their culture started in schools: the government revealed a new school curriculum that eliminated the use of the Uyghur language, and instead replaced it with strictly Chinese. Additionally, the Chinese government built several buildings that they claimed to be “vocational training centers,” but, in reality, a more appropriate characterization would be “prison camps.”^{lxiii} Another attempt at eradicating culture resulted in the destruction of mosques. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute found that “approximately 16,000 mosques in Xinjiang (65% of the total) have been destroyed or damaged as a result of government policies, mostly since 2017.”^{lxiv} Another method of cracking down that the government exercised was forced labor. Between 2017 and 2020, eighty thousand previously detained Uyghurs were sent to factories throughout China. Forced labor is an important element of the government’s plan for Xinjiang’s economic development. Chinese officials have described the policy as ‘poverty alleviation.’^{lxv} As a result of 80 percent of China’s cotton production being based in Xinjiang, the province has been transformed into a large center for textile production.^{lxvi} An insatiable demand for labor in Xinjiang followed, and the Chinese government has not been reluctant to force the Uyghurs to fulfill these demands. The system is enforced by complicated technological surveillance that includes teachers, guards, relatives, and police. The inhumane treatment of the Uyghurs demonstrates their inequality relative to other citizens in China and the dominance of Han-centrism.

Zhonghua

In its first decades, the PRC tacitly acknowledged its past and embraced its identity as a multinational state. But under President Xi Jinping who assumed power in 2013, the CCP began actively working to erase the cultural and political diversity of the past. This exhibits the modern Chinese government’s commitment to decimate culture, religion, or beliefs that are different from traditional Han culture. Essentially, the Chinese government believes that the only way to preserve power and create a strong state is to create a unified state—and anyone

who actively opposes the majority must adapt or be punished for their actions. Xi aspires to “forge the communal consciousness of the Chinese nation” through assimilation as he asserted during the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017.^{lxxviii} Xi believes economic development is not sufficient for securing the communist party’s rule and reviving the China dream. According to Xi, “every *minzu* (nationality, ethnic group) of Xinjiang is a family-member linked to Chinese (*zhonghua*) bloodlines.”^{lxxix} Ethnic nationalism is a way to unite people, but it is also a political construct that can be used to consolidate political power. Additionally, another method that the government is using is to advertise the supremacy of the Han race and portray all ethnic minorities, particularly the Uyghurs, as inferior to the Han. The modern Chinese state continues to depict ethnic minorities as illiterate, poverty-stricken and practitioners of “backward” traditions. They are called “barbarians” that need to be “civilized.”^{lxxx} In contrast, the Han majority are seen as advanced and superior.^{lxxxi} The Chinese government aspires to depict the “strength” and “intelligence” of the Han people, all the while representing ethnic minorities in a completely contrasting manner that casts a shadow over them.

Genocide

The Uyghurs are being forced into a cultural assimilation that is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese government has imprisoned more than one million people since 2017 and subjected those not detained to intense surveillance, religious restrictions, forced labor, and forced sterilizations. In 2020, researchers documented 201 reeducation camps and 179 detention centers and prisons.^{lxxii} Through coerced insertion of IUDs (80% of all IUD placements in China in 2018 were performed in Xinjiang, which has only 1.8% of the population), sterilizations and mass detentions, the CCP lowered population growth rates by as much as 84% in Uyghur population areas between 2015 and 2018.^{lxxiii} The last two U.S. Secretaries of State have labeled China’s treatment of the Uyghurs as genocide. Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State under former President Trump, said “we are witnessing the systematic attempt to destroy Uyghurs by the Chinese party-state,” and that Chinese authorities “have made clear that they are engaged in the forced assimilation and eventual erasure of a vulnerable ethnic and religious minority group.” Similarly, current Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said “forcing men, women and children into concentration camps, trying to, in effect, reeducate them to be adherents to the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party, all of that speaks to an effort to commit genocide.” Attempting to eradicate culture is a form of genocide.

Civilizing missions result in cultural genocide at the least, and in some definitions, full genocide. Along with the massive re-education camps, China’s authorities have intensified organized labor transfers. The goal is to discipline, ‘civilize,’ and assimilate ethnic minorities from Xinjiang, and to transform them into citizens who accept the state ideology, are obedient to the CCP, and embrace the culture, values, and habits of the Han.^{lxxv} In fact, “Chinese authorities have placed as many as 1.5 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Hui into a system of medium to maximum-security ‘reeducation’ camps since 2017-making it the largest internment of a religious minority since World War II.”^{lxxvi} To prove they have been reformed, the Uyghurs must show their allegiance and appreciation to China, the Communist Party, and Xi Jinping.^{lxxvii} Whether China’s treatment of the Uyghurs is labeled as a cultural genocide or a complete genocide, the Chinese government is violating human rights and putting a stain on the country’s image, again reflecting their vacillation about tolerance for diverse ethnicities.

Soft Power

Hypernationalism is contributing to an undermining of China’s soft power in the global context and has the potential to subvert stability at home.

Political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. coined the term “soft power” to describe a country’s ability to influence others without resorting to coercive pressure.^{lxxviii} In practice, this process entails countries projecting their values, ideals, and culture across borders to foster goodwill and strengthen partnerships. For governments, the rationale is simple: it is easier to work with others when they are admired and respected, and advancing a foreign policy issue is far easier and cheaper. Advancing national interests is dependent on soft power.^{lxxix}

China is now the world’s second leading power after the United States and has already overtaken America on some dimensions. It has the capabilities of a global power—the world’s largest population, second largest economy, and largest standing armed forces. However, China trails in terms of influence—the ability to alter events and the actions of others.^{lxxx} In 2014, during the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping remarked, “we should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s messages to the world.”^{lxxxi} However, China’s hypernationalism and human rights violations affect China’s narrative. According to an estimate by David Shambaugh, a leading China expert, the country spends at least \$10 billion annually on public diplomacy—much more than other countries. The investments have not improved views of China in a meaningful way and in March 2021, the European Union joined the US and Canada to impose sanctions on China for the human rights abuses against the Uyghurs. President Biden said that in order for China to become a world leader, it must “gain the confidence of other countries...as long as they are engaged in activity that is contrary to basic human rights, it is going to be hard.”^{lxxxiii} The US is holding firm on its stance to hold China accountable. In effect, China finds it challenging to move their international profile beyond the issues of human rights.^{lxxxiv}

Countries that fear Beijing’s hostility, power, and growing intimidation are building informal coalitions against China in areas such as semiconductor production, wireless technology, and new types of military relationships. Many universities in the U.S. and Europe have shut down China’s educational Confucius Institutes and also begun cutting links with programs in China, sometimes moving the programs to Taiwan instead. Given the lack of trust, China has undermined its ability to lead on issues such as climate change.^{lxxxv} Furthermore, the US diplomatically boycotted the Beijing Olympics in Winter 2022 because of China’s treatment of the Uyghurs. The White House stated that “the Biden administration will not send any diplomatic or official representation to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and Paralympic Games given the PRC’s ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses.” Other countries including Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia also issued a diplomatic boycott. The Olympics is a place where the world comes together and countries can increase and display their individual soft power given the opportunity to show culture and values on a global stage. Despite the value of participation in the Olympics, several countries stayed away from Beijing to take a stand against China’s human rights violations and oppression. Oppression of minorities fueled by Han ethnic nationalism is an obstacle to China being a superpower. Xi and the Chinese government are discovering that “a ruler may use an arsenal of technologies to terrorise a vast territory, but when he confuses harmony with uniformity, he will be weak, and his country small in the eyes of the world.”^{lxxxvii} Despite China’s robust economy and importance to trade and the global economy, its repressive political system that relies on hypernationalism is hindering its quest for soft power throughout much of the world.

At Home

By promoting inequality at home, the CCP has violated its principle of class revolution. The promotion of a unified Han majority rocks the egalitarian foundation on which the CCP was built. The CCP’s focus is to maintain control at any cost and deploy both the “carrot of economic development and the stick of political and religious repression.”^{lxxxviii} Furthermore, the PRC refuses to recognize the problems. The Han majority dominates the political system, eliminating a vehicle for progressive changes such as fair representation in government. Such exploitation for the benefit of the nation-state has the potential to lead to uprisings, radicalization, and revolution.

The recent protests in China against zero COVID policies reflect a backlash against political repression that is intertwined with the repression of ethnic minorities. The Uyghur system of oppression catalyzed the protests. Xinjiang had been under lockdown for 100 days when a deadly fire broke out in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang, killing 10 Uyghurs in late November 2022.^{lxxxix} Protesters voiced concerns that the extreme lockdowns made it impossible for residents to escape the fire and for authorities to help because of parked cars.^{xc} Han Chinese protesting the deaths of Uyghurs is atypical because of the history of the Chinese government justifying its Xinjiang policies by labeling Uyghurs as terrorists and religious extremists. It might be the start of a revolution and “that this bell of solidarity across ethnic lines, once rung, can’t be so easily unring.”^{xcii} The rise of surveillance technology across China has undoubtedly made the organization and coordination of dissent more difficult. However, while local, single protests are not unusual in China, large decentralized eruptions that cross class and geographic boundaries are uncommon.^{xciii} Even with signs that the Chinese government has relaxed some of the repressive zero COVID policies, it may not halt movement towards instability at home related to ethnic issues.

Conclusion

The Han have been absorbing other ethnicities throughout China’s history. The development of the Han nationality has been compared to a snowball because it “gets bigger the farther it rolls”.^{xciii} The Chinese government’s hypernationalism and corresponding efforts to achieve cultural homogeneity are reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. China is involved in a high-risk strategy that could end up undermining the government’s power and being its Achilles heel in which repression fails along with stability. The construction of the unified multi-national PRC is “the largest social engineering project in human history.”^{xciv}

The issue of citizenship being different from ethnicity is pervasive in the era of globalization. The preservation of ethnicity and guarding against marginalization must be addressed. In all contexts, governments must accept the essential overarching paradigm that states change and are largely political constructs—but ethnicity must be respected. Human rights are a global concern and genocide of any kind must be stopped. The true power of any state should lie in its consistent and equal treatment of *all* of its citizens—in word and in action.

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