

Social reengineering in the name of security in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

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Since 2016 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been engaged in the mass repression of Turkic Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The most headline-grabbing element of this has been the arbitrary detention of at least one million Turkic Muslims (primarily those of Uyghur ethnicity) in 're-education' facilities of various categories. But this has also proceeded hand-in-hand with the erection of a pervasive 'security state' throughout the region characterised by the deployment of both technologically-enabled surveillance and more traditional human-centric, or 'mass line', forms of surveillance and the repression of Turkic Muslim cultural identities. The CCP has maintained that this approach has been required to rid Xinjiang of what it terms the 'three evils' of 'terrorism, extremism and separatism'.

Some may see this as an undoubtedly heavy-handed but understandable response to episodes of terrorism in or connected to Xinjiang. A closer examination of how each major element of the system of repression in Xinjiang fits together, however, reveals that for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) security can only be achieved through the eradication of autonomous Turkic Muslim identities and their replacement with 'domesticated' ethnic identities compatible with Han Chinese political and socio-economic norms. As such it is emblematic of a settler colonial project as it 'strives for the dissolution of native societies' and seeks to erect 'a new colonial society on the expropriated land base'. Particularly revealing here is how the functioning of the

‘re-education’ system is designed to serve the Party’s twin goals of ideological ‘transformation’ of Turkic Muslims and a ‘developmentalist’ socio-economic agenda of promoting ‘modernity’. The objective of what would become the ‘re-education’ system, as Xinjiang’s former top CCP official Zhang Chunxian pithily put in 2014, was thus to ‘cut weeds’ (i.e. control manifestations of ‘extremist’ religious ideology) and ‘dig out the roots’ (i.e. address the socio-economic and cultural conditions that permitted such ‘extremism’ to flourish).

As shall be demonstrated below, there is in fact a two-layered approach to the Party-state’s efforts to transform Xinjiang that reflects near and long-term imperatives of settler colonialism. First, the surveillance apparatus enables ‘social sorting’ of the Uyghur population based on ‘signs’ of ‘extremism’, thus identifying those to be interned in various forms of ‘re-education’, ensuring the near-term goal of ‘security’. Second, the Party-state’s emphasis on accelerating socio-economic development through state-led infrastructure investment and industrial development, coerced population transfers of Uyghurs, and rapid urbanisation is geared to the long-term goal of demographically, economically and physically transforming Xinjiang into a ‘normal’ province. As such it is an inherently settler colonial project that seeks to not only ‘hollow out’ Turkic Muslim identities but to construct a ‘new Xinjiang’ dominated by Han Chinese modes of political, economic, and cultural life.

Cutting weeds: Securitisation, surveillance and the ‘People’s War on Terrorism’

Xinjiang, as scholar Joanne Smith-Finley has pointedly noted, ‘was involuntarily incorporated into the Chinese nation-state’ through a ‘gradual colonial process’ from the Qing dynasty’s (1644-1911) conquest of the mid-17th century to its incorporation into the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. While the classic markers of colonial forms of domination—i.e. the exploitation of human and natural resources of a subjugated territory by an exogenous polity and/or the expropriation of land and

resources of indigenous populations to construct a ‘new’ society or polity by exogenous populations—were only partially evident under the Qing, they have been intensely felt under the PRC. Since 1949 the CCP’s approach to controlling the region has sought to: maintain the political and economic domination of indigenous populations by the Han Chinese-dominated Party-state; exploit and/or expropriate the land and resources of the region; and encourage Han Chinese settlement of the region. This was underpinned by a ‘carrot and stick’ approach to the region’s Turkic Muslim populations which promised the protection of their individual culture, language and religious practices so long as the CCP’s political power remained unchallenged.

This balance by and large held until the 1990s. As with the rest of China under Deng Xiaoping’s ‘reform and opening’ policies, the Party-state’s approach in Xinjiang shifted in favour of an approach based on the assumption that delivery of economic development and modernisation would ultimately ‘buy’, if not the loyalty, then at least the acquiescence of the Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim populations. In the Party-state’s thinking and practice ‘development’ assumed central importance as a key to resolve its Xinjiang ‘problem’ by breaking down the social, economic and cultural barriers between non-Han minorities and the Han Chinese majority. In this framework, the Han Chinese-dominated Party-state was conceived of as the transformative and modernising agent. In parallel the authorities also implemented yearly ‘Strike Hard’ campaigns against those that it defined as ‘splittists’ (i.e. separatists) and, opportunistically after 9/11, as ‘terrorists and extremists’. While Uyghur religious expression had always been closely managed, post-9/11 it was securitised through intense state regulation to not only monitor imams and religious institutions but also establish guidelines for the identification of potential ‘deviant’ or ‘illegal’ behaviour amongst believers.

The most obvious manifestations of the Party-state’s ‘developmentalist’ turn have been the Great Western Development (GWD) plan (launched in 2000) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (launched in 2013) which have both sought to re-make Xinjiang into an industrial and agricultural base and a trade and energy corridor for

the national economy. While bringing economic development, these initiatives created a variety of new socio-economic pressures— such as encouragement of further Han settlement, rapid urbanisation, and environmental degradation—that exacerbated interethnic tensions. These tensions exploded in July 2009 with the outbreak of inter-ethnic violence in Xinjiang’s capital Urumqi sparked by the deaths of two migrant workers in Guangzhou. This event was significant as it underlined for the Party-state that economic development alone would not deliver its objective of transforming Xinjiang into a ‘normal’ province. Rather, development would have to be coupled with a renewed focus on security. Thus in 2010 then President Hu Jintao oversaw both the roll-out of a ‘Xinjiang support package’ including targeted central government investment and infrastructure spending and the installation of thousands of high-definition surveillance cameras on buses, in schools, and in shopping centres, as well as on the streets of urban areas to increase police presence in key places, vital sectors and public areas throughout the region.

Despite these efforts the region experienced sporadic violence and terrorist attacks between 2010 and 2014 that reinforced the Party-state’s long-standing fears that interconnections between anti-Party ideologies and ‘hostile external forces’ would undermine and potentially destroy Chinese control over the region. In the past this had taken the form of fears that Uyghur nationalist ‘counter-revolutionary’ separatists would obtain assistance from the Soviet Union to subvert Chinese rule. After 9/11 however this threat—in Beijing’s perception—had transformed into a more diffuse one in which ‘radical’ or ‘extremist’ versions of Islam had seeped into the region from the Central Asian states, Afghanistan and Pakistan to inspire religiously-motivated attacks by Uyghurs against the state. Crucially, Party-state officials and ethnic policy specialists viewed this threat as having taken root in fertile soil due to the shortcomings of its ‘developmentalist’ agenda throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

After a terrorist bombing in Urumqi in April 2014 the CCP held a Second Xinjiang Work Forum attended by the full Politburo and hundreds of Party officials in Beijing on 28-29 May 2014. ‘Work forums’, in the taxonomy of CCP official meetings,

typically comprise focused meetings of relevant CCP officials on a specialised issue or topic and are often central to refining or revamping existing policy guidelines. In contrast to the 2010 version, this Work Forum emphasised a focus on ethnic and religious issues rather than economic policy as the path to resolving the threat of terrorism in Xinjiang. Here, Xi Jinping not only called for ‘walls made of copper and steel’ and ‘nets spread from the earth to the sky’ to catch ‘terrorists’ but also for the Party to focus on ‘meticulous’ religious work to make ‘religion adapt to a socialist society’ and ensure that people of all ethnic groups identify themselves with ‘China, its culture and socialism with Chinese characteristics’. Significantly, the state media report of the results of the forum also noted that Xi voiced an assimilationist approach to ‘ethnic policy’ by suggesting ‘that authorities should strengthen exchanges and communication between different ethnic groups, promote bilingual education, and strive for a more integrated social structure and community environment where people are not grouped solely based on their ethnicity’.

Such an overtly assimilationist guideline for policy has subsequently informed the broad contours of the ‘developmentalist’ agenda in Xinjiang. An official development plan, for instance, of December 2017 for the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC)—a paramilitary organisation with security and economic functions—explicitly identified the ‘monoethnic’ and ‘seriously unbalanced’ population structure of southern Xinjiang (predominantly populated by Uyghurs) as a serious problem to be remedied by the expansion of XPCC activities in the south. ‘The development of the corps to the south’, the document stated, ‘is conducive to gathering more people and effectively regulating southern Xinjiang’s social structure, by promoting economic, social and cultural exchanges among all ethnic groups, and so as to play a “ballast stone” role of strategic stability’ in southern Xinjiang’.

One of the main instruments however through which the Party-state would ‘cut out weeds’ was an increasing reliance on surveillance both of the hi-tech and labour heavy varieties. Although the rollout of hi-tech surveillance methods had begun in 2010, it accelerated exponentially with the appointment of Chen Quanguo as new

Xinjiang Party Chairman in 2016. Chen had previously implemented a policing system of ‘grid style management’ during his prior position as Party leader in Tibet (2011-2015) that segmented ‘urban communities into geometric zones’ policed by ‘convenience’ police stations connected to Closed Circuit TV (CCTV) cameras and police databases enabling greater surveillance capabilities. In Xinjiang, Chen not only implemented this approach but also integrated it with the CCTV surveillance systems already established in Xinjiang, resulting in a multi-tiered policing system based on exponential recruitment of contract police officers to staff ‘convenience’ police stations. Further measures—including the compulsory fitting of GPS trackers in motor vehicles, use of facial recognition scanners at checkpoints and major public amenities and installation of apps that wipe smartphones of ‘subversive’ material—were also implemented under Chen’s watch. The purpose of this system, Chen’s deputy Zhu Halian detailed during a speech on 18 August 2017, was to achieve ‘comprehensive, round-the-clock and three-dimensional prevention control’ to ‘deny any opportunity to hostile forces and violent terrorists’ to undermine the region’s ‘stability’.

This constituted, according to two analysts at the Xinjiang Police University, Ding Wang and Dan Shan, the distinctive element of what they described as the ‘Xinjiang mode’ of ‘counterterrorism’. The ‘Xinjiang mode’, they contended, combined the ‘war model’ of counterinsurgency adopted by the American military in Iraq and Afghanistan with China’s own ‘public security’ model and ‘governance model’. In an apt description of the system implemented by Chen Quanguo, they asserted that the ‘public security’ model is ‘based on the construction of the anti-terrorism intelligence system’ that endows public security forces with ‘the ability to obtain information on signs, tendencies ... related to violence and terrorism’ and thereby enhance ‘social prevention and control capabilities’. The Party-state’s use of Maoist ‘mass line’ mobilisation in Xinjiang since 2014 as a means of obtaining such information and monitoring Uyghur society—such as the ‘Becoming Family’ campaign—is consistent with the ‘public security model’. ‘Becoming Family’ involved ‘10,000 teams of visiting officials’ descending ‘on rural Xinjiang in 2017 to report on

‘extremist’ behaviour such as not drinking alcohol, fasting during Ramadan, sporting long beards, and possessing “undesirable” items like Qur’ans’ with individuals then ‘categorised as “trustworthy,” “average” or “untrustworthy” depending on their age, ethnicity, employment status, and depth of religious knowledge and practice’.

That such surveillance is but a means to an end is demonstrated by Wang and Shan’s subsequent description of the ‘governance model’ component of the Xinjiang mode, which emphasises that the ‘scientific and effective management’ of terrorism in the region requires that the Party resolve the ‘ethnic and religious ideological issues’ that give rise to extremism. Here, the Party’s prescription to ensure that Uyghurs have ‘immunity’ to ‘extremism’ combines both ideological and material elements. First, religious extremism is deemed to be an ideological problem that can only be solved by ideological methods of sustained ‘education’ of the population in order to reject the brainwashing of religion perceived to be distorted. Second, the state must buttress these ideological methods with the ‘construction of people’s livelihood’. It is only through such means, Wang and Shan conclude, that ‘people of all ethnic groups move closer to secularization and modernization’.

Significantly, the ‘anti-terrorism intelligence system’ established by ‘grid management’ and technological surveillance has permitted the state to undertake what surveillance scholar Richard Jenkins terms ‘social sorting’ on a large scale. ‘Social sorting’ entails the ‘identification and ordering of individuals in order to “put them in their place” within local, national and global “institutional orders”’, and to ascribe to them particular penalties, constraints or sanctions according to their categorisation. In Xinjiang it is evident that the surveillance apparatus established by Chen Quanguo since 2016 has provided the authorities with the necessary capability to simultaneously identify and categorise individuals as prone to ‘distorted religious views’ and assign to them specific penalties or sanctions. Indeed, the data collected by the various surveillance measures implemented in Xinjiang is aggregated by an app used by security personnel, the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), to report ‘on activities or circumstances deemed suspicious’ and to prompt ‘investigations of people the system flags as problematic’. In this latter

regard some 48 ‘signs of extremism’—including growing a beard, contact with family members overseas or naming children with certain names—were identified by the regional government in 2017 as one measure of assessing which penalties or sanctions are to be applied. The scope of this technologically enabled labour intensive surveillance is such that it ‘reaches from cameras on the wall, to the chips inside mobile devices, to Uyghurs’ very physiognomy’.

Digging out the roots: Coercive developmentalism and the remaking of Xinjiang

The ‘Xinjiang mode’ does not however simply increase the Party-state’s ability to identify and interdict individuals but also to engage in a systematic attempt to discipline and manufacture the consent of the Uyghur population by actively shaping individual thought and behaviour. That this second element is central to the Xinjiang mode is demonstrated by a closer examination of the legislative and discursive architecture that has been erected to support the security state in Xinjiang. Following the passage of China’s National Counter-Terrorism Law of 27 December 2015 which defined extremism as the ‘ideological basis for terrorism’, the XUAR government passed the ‘Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on De-extremification’ in March 2017. This regulation was significant for not only demonstrating the Party’s objective to categorise and sanction those displaying signs of extremist behavior but also for its intention to undertake ‘educational transformation’ of such individuals. Article 3 defined ‘extremification’ as ‘speech and actions under the influence of extremism, that imbue radical religious ideology, and reject and interfere with normal production and livelihood’, while Article 9 enumerated 15 primary expressions of extremist thinking, such as having abnormal beards, religious names, niqabs and burqas, and ‘failing to perform the legal formalities in marrying or divorcing by religious methods’. Where Article 9 is violated, the regulations noted, public security organs are empowered to give public

security administrative sanctions including individual and group education on the legal system, ideology, behavioral correction, and skills training.

China's August 2019 White Paper on 'Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang' subsequently underlined the centrality of this objective to define and regulate Uyghur values, beliefs, and loyalties. Based on the principle of 'striking the minority in isolation and uniting and educating the majority', this document asserted that the state must not only deal with 'terrorist crimes in accordance with the law' but also '*educate and rescue* personnel infected with religious extremism' in order to treat 'both symptoms and the root causes' of religious extremism' (my emphasis). Through education and training, the training centres would promote development, increase the people's overall income, and help Xinjiang 'achieve social stability and enduring peace'.

The Party-state's linkage of religious belief and under-development as 'root causes' of 'extremism' among Uyghurs was reinforced again by the release on 17 September 2020 of a White Paper on 'Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang'. This document asserted that the enduring poverty of many parts of Xinjiang had been due to the fact that 'terrorists, separatists and religious extremists have long preached that "the afterlife is fated" and that "religious teachings are superior to state laws", inciting the public to resist learning the standard spoken and written Chinese language, reject modern science, and refuse to improve their vocational skills, economic conditions, and the ability to better their own lives'. This situation had caused local people to have 'outdated ideas', 'suffer from poor education and employability', and have 'low employment rates and incomes' making them susceptible to 'extremism'.

The now well-documented use of forced or coerced Uyghur labour, and the transfer of thousands of Uyghur 'surplus' labourers to other areas of China, thus emerges here not as an improvised outgrowth to the system of 're-education' but rather as arguably an integral part of it. The reported 'graduation' of thousands of Uyghurs from 'vocational training' to become low-skilled labour in factories directly

connected or close to ‘re-education’ facilities, for example, achieves a number of important goals for the Party-state in this context: it places Uyghurs in Chinese-dominated environments and separates them from the familial, cultural, and religious connections that are deemed to make Uyghurs prone to extremism. The Xinjiang mode of counterterrorism is thus not simply punitive and exclusionary in intent but also disciplinary and educative. As we have seen, while the ‘anti-terrorism intelligence system’ permits the Party-state to identify, categorise, and sanction individuals on the basis of observed behaviors, the re-education system places emphasis on ‘remoulding’ the physical, ideological, and moral qualities of citizens. The ‘Xinjiang mode’ is thus linked to the Party-state’s settler colonial objective of transforming Xinjiang and the Turkic Muslims that inhabit it.

The Party-state’s framing of the family separations that have resulted from the forced labour components of ‘re-education’ is particularly revealing here. The secretary of the Party Committee of the Education Bureau of Yutian County, for example, noted to state media in October 2018 that because ‘the parents of these children were poisoned by extreme ideologies’ and were ‘unwilling to send their children to school’, the children ‘could not speak Mandarin and failed to develop a good life habits’. But, he said, after being enrolled in the elementary school of Yutian County Vocational and Technical Education Training Center, the children have developed ‘good daily habits’ such as ‘learning to wash their faces, brush their teeth, and attend to personal hygiene’. The implication is clear: it is only by removing these children from their Uyghur environments can they hope to reach basic levels of ‘civilised’ behaviour.

The implementation of these new forms of social control in Xinjiang, as Sean Roberts, an expert on Xinjiang and the Uyghur has pointedly stated, are now framed by a racialised conception of threat whereby the Uyghur population is conceived of as a ‘virtual biological threat to the body of society’. Indeed, from government officials describing Uyghur ‘extremism and terrorism’ as a ‘tumour’ to equating religious observance as an ‘illness’, the CCP’s discourse frames key elements of Uyghur identity as pathologies to be ‘cured’. Thus, a Xinjiang Communist Youth

League official, as part of an address titled 'What Kind of Place is the Educational Transformation Center' recorded in October 2017, explained that:

'The religious extremist ideology is a type of poisonous medicine which confuses the mind of the people. Once they are poisoned by it, some turn into extremists who no longer value even their own lives ... If we do not eradicate religious extremism at its roots, the violent terrorist incidents will grow and spread all over like an incurable malignant tumor. Although a certain number of people who have been indoctrinated with extremist ideology have not committed any crimes, they are already infected by the disease. There is always a risk that the illness will manifest itself at any moment, which would cause serious harm to the public. That is why they must be admitted to a re-education hospital in time to treat and cleanse the virus from their brain and restore their normal mind.'

The Party-state's settler colonial project ascendant

In July 2022 Xi Jinping undertook what state media termed an 'inspection tour' of Xinjiang. Throughout the official report of his remarks, the necessity for the ongoing transformation of the region's non-Han ethnic groups was repeatedly stressed. After listening to a 'work report' (i.e. a summation of local official's achievements/progress and remaining challenges to policy implementation) by the local party committee, for example, Xi noted that the 'most important thing for Xinjiang to maintain long-term stability lies in the people's hearts' and as such 'it is necessary to forge a solid sense of the Chinese national community and promote exchanges and integration among all ethnic groups'. That such 'forging' amounts to a policy of assimilation was left in little doubt with Xi declaiming at the same meeting that '*Chinese civilisation* is the root of the culture of *all* ethnic groups in Xinjiang' and that the Party must 'promote the close embrace of all ethnic groups like pomegranate seeds'.

Chinese media reporting of Xi's tour also indicated how such an objective will be

achieved. First—and consistent with the Party-state’s push under Xi to inculcate an officially-mandated form of ‘Chinese traditional culture’ through the education system—performance of ‘Chinese’ culture has become an important means and marker of the assimilationist drive in Xinjiang. During Xi’s visit to a ‘95 percent’ ethnic minority community in the Tianshan District of Urumqi, he observed a ‘children’s performance of excellent Chinese traditional culture’. Second, the policies of ‘poverty alleviation’—including population transfers of ‘surplus’ rural labour (i.e. Uyghurs) out of the south of Xinjiang—that have been connected to the objective of ‘optimising’ the region’s population (i.e. diluting Turkic Muslim demographic predominance) will continue. Third, the maintenance of the Party-state’s control and supervision of Turkic Muslim cultural and religious practice remains paramount. Indeed, Xi noted that the Party must continue to improve the ‘governance capacity of religious affairs’ so as to achieve the ‘healthy development of religion’ in Xinjiang. Core to this is to ensure the ‘Sinification of Islam’ in Xinjiang which to date has amounted not only to a program of extreme securitisation of Uyghur identity but also the erasure of physical and spatial markers of Uyghur religiosity such as the closing or repurposing of thousands of mosques and the destruction of Uyghur *mazar* (religious shrines) and cemeteries.

While the initial impetus for the erection of the security state in the region derived from fears of terrorism, it is now clear that the Party-state believes that the policies of ‘re-education’ and systematic surveillance that have followed in its wake provide the means through which to achieve a lasting transformation of Xinjiang and its Turkic Muslim population. The key, as Xi himself stated during his visit, is to reshape what he defined as ‘the deepest level of identity’ - ‘cultural identity’. The Party, he asserted, can only do so by building a system that can ‘reach the hearts of the people, educate and guide the masses of all ethnic groups to establish a correct view of the country, history, nationality, culture, and religion, and enhance their identification with the great motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Communist Party of China, and socialism with Chinese characteristics’.

Image: Crowd outside a mosque in Xianjiang province. Credit: Richard Towell/Flickr.