



The 'People's War on Terror' in Xinjiang: A model for China?

By Hannah Theaker

In 2022, a long-delayed report from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights declared that actions taken by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) may 'constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity'.¹ Since 2017, a regime of mass surveillance, incarceration, 're-education' and forced labour has been implemented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the 26 million inhabitants of the region – with devastating consequences for the millions of Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Hui and Han citizens and their families who have found their lives caught up inside it.

In 2021, British Members of Parliament passed a motion declaring that the PRC's actions in XUAR constitute genocide, whilst the United Kingdom's (UK) High Court has heard legal challenges to the import of goods from the region on forced labour grounds.² Six years on from the first reports of mass detentions, human rights abuses in XUAR have emerged as a cross-cutting issue, with ramifications for international relations, labour rights, trade, surveillance technology and artificial intelligence, development, and understanding ethnic policy across the PRC. However, first and foremost, this remains a human tragedy.

¹ 'OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China', United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 31/08/2022, <https://bit.ly/3qbrSY1> (checked: 26/09/2023).

² 'Human Rights: Xinjiang', House of Commons, debated on 22/04/2022, <https://bit.ly/3qDKhgy> (checked: 26/09/2023).



It has taken time, extensive research, and testimony by survivors, activists and scholars to uncover the intent, extent and impact of this state policy. This Primer is intended to give a brief, introductory overview to the contours of what has happened and what is continuing to happen in XUAR, particularly in relation to ethnic policy and its evolution in the PRC; XUAR; the 'People's War on Terror' from 2014–2021; and the 'standardisation' of counterterrorism and future of the region under Ma Xingrui, the new Communist Party Secretary of XUAR. It ends with some brief recommendations which intend to prevent the CCP from normalising its repressive policies in Xinjiang.

The CCP's ethnic policy

Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities*, wrote famously of the struggle to stretch the 'short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire'.³ 20th century Chinese history can be read as the history of that long transition from empire to nation, and the contemporary PRC remains concerned deeply with the question of what it means to be a (Chinese) communist state which has retained the borders of a multi-ethnic empire. The PRC today recognises officially 56 ethnic groups [*minzu*, 民族] with a complex system of autonomous jurisdictions and privileges which were intended previously to protect minority rights. Under the old formula of Fei Xiaotong, a Chinese anthropologist and one of the key architects of the state-led process which identified the *minzu* groups now recognised by the PRC, the Chinese nation [中华民族] exhibits 'pluralistic unity' [多元一体]: plural as it contains many ethnic groups, but unified as these ethnic groups are united together into a single overarching whole.⁴

Despite this rhetoric of ethnic plurality, in practice Han make up 92% of the country's population and the CCP is Han-dominated.⁵ In popular depictions, minorities are exoticised, othered, and portrayed as backward, stereotypes which are often reinforced by official depictions of minorities as colourful, singing-and-dancing groups grateful for state guidance toward modernity.⁶

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

⁴ Fei Xiaotong, 'The pluralistic unity structure of the Chinese nation', *Journal of Peking University*, 4 (1989), pp. 1–19.

⁵ 'Main Data of the Seventh National Population Census', National Bureau of Statistics of China, 11/05/2021, <https://bit.ly/47R4X5w> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁶ There is extensive literature on *minzu*, identity, and exoticisation in contemporary China. See: Dru Gladney, *Dislocating China: Muslims, Minorities and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,



Although a language of ethnic inclusion exists, for many non-Han, lived reality points to a gulf between rhetoric and their own experiences of marginalisation.

At the political level, the ‘autonomy’ granted to the autonomous regions, prefectures and counties is limited, with key positions almost always allocated to Han bureaucrats. Moreover, to the Han ethno-nationalists who have been emboldened by the regime of Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CCP, ‘Chinese’ and Han are coterminous, hollowing out the idea that ‘Chinese nation’ could function as an inclusive banner identity. Islamophobia further complicates the inclusion of Muslim minorities into an imagined national identity.⁷

These tensions in the PRC’s ethnic policy also run through the history of CCP thought. Although the official *minzu* system is intended to recognise and protect ethnic and cultural differences, ethnic identities are considered to be an expression of class difference. Hence, with economic development and the realisation of a socialist regime, ethnicities should ultimately disappear as all evolve toward a higher, unified identity.⁸ Formerly, theorists expected this disappearance would happen naturally over time as economic development brought greater integration.

However, a group known as the ‘second generation of *minzu* theorists’ have emerged to prominence since the 2010s, with prominent figures arguing that the *minzu* system and the accommodations for ethnic minorities it enshrines are in fact harming integration.⁹ They advocate for a more explicitly assimilationist set of policies, including promotion of Mandarin education, and, ultimately, the dismantling of the *minzu* system itself.¹⁰ Xi’s nationalist turn and the emergence of the ‘Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’ as a key slogan have seen the adoption of aspects of the assimilationist approach championed by these thinkers, where assimilation always means towards an implicitly Han norm.

2003) and; Tom Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2010).

⁷ David Stroup, ‘Good Minzu and bad Muslims: Islamophobia in China’s state media’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 27:4 (2021), pp. 1231–1252.

⁸ On the evolution and re-emergence of concepts of ‘ethnic extinction’ (民族消亡), see: David Tobin, *Securing China’s Northwest Frontier: Identity and Insecurity in Xinjiang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 74–86.

⁹ Ma Rong, ‘Reflections on the debate on China’s ethnic policy: my reform proposals and their critics’, *Asian Ethnicity*, 15:2 (2014) and; 胡鞍钢 [Hu Angang] and 胡联合 [Hu Lianhe], ‘第二代民族政策:促进民族交融一体和繁荣一体’ [‘The Second Generation of Minzu Policies: Promoting Unity in Minzu Fusion and Unity Prosperity’], 北京大学 [Peking University], 2011, <https://bit.ly/43AJwCk> (checked: 26/09/2023).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Drivers of repression in Xinjiang

XUAR, located in the far northwest of the PRC, covers a vast and ecologically diverse terrain, ranging from the deserts and oasis towns of the Tarim Basin to high grasslands in the north. The official Chinese name of ‘Xinjiang’ [新疆] means ‘new dominion’, and first came into use following the Qing conquest of the region in the 1750s.¹¹ The Uyghurs are the largest group in the region, presently comprising around 45% of the population.¹² The region is highly ethnically diverse, with significant Han, Hui, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik populations, among others.

State narratives have emphasised either separatism or Islamist-inspired terrorism as motivations behind long-term disaffection in XUAR, with particular emphasis placed on terrorism as a root cause of violence following the United States (US)-led ‘Global War on Terror’.¹³ However, tensions in the region generally arise more from economic marginalisation and discrimination against Uyghurs and other minorities.¹⁴

State-backed campaigns to support Han migration into XUAR mean the proportion of Han in the region now stands at 42%, up from around 6% in the 1950s, an increase achieved largely through the aegis of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, a paramilitary settler-colonial body which reports to Beijing directly.¹⁵ Extensive discrimination against non-Han means Uyghurs and other non-Han have found themselves locked out of jobs and enterprises in XUAR created by industrialisation since the economic liberalisation of the PRC began in the late 1970s. Meanwhile, the

¹¹ The name Xinjiang is controversial; as the translation ‘new dominion’ suggests, it is an exonym which imposes a vision of the region that comes fundamentally from outside, and it has profoundly colonial connotations. Many Uyghurs outside the PRC, those seeking independence particularly, prefer East Turkestan, a name associated with two early 20th century short-lived independent republics established in the region. The name ‘East Turkestan’ is banned in the PRC. For more on the history of Xinjiang, see: James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2021) and; on Uyghur history and culture, see: Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

¹² 新疆维吾尔自治区2010年人口普查资料(上册) [Tabulation on the 2010 Population Census of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Vol. 1] (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2012), p. 37.

¹³ For a detailed assessment of the CCP’s explanations of unrest in Xinjiang, see: Sean R. Roberts, *The War on Uyghurs: China’s Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020).

¹⁴ On inequality in Xinjiang, see: Ilham Tohti, *We Uyghurs Have No Say: An Imprisoned Writer Speaks*, trans., Yaxue Cao, Cindy Carter and Matthew Robertson, (London: Verso, 2022).

¹⁵ Laura Murphy, Nyrola Elimä and David Tobin, ‘“Until Nothing is Left”: China’s Settler Corporation and its Human Rights Violations in the Uyghur Region’, *Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice*, 11/07/2022, <https://bit.ly/43HQQMz> (checked: 26/09/2023) and; 新疆统计年鉴 [Xinjiang statistical yearbook], (Beijing: China Statistics Bureau, 2007).



environmental damage caused by such industry wrecks the livelihoods of indigenous farmers and herders.¹⁶

Tensions also surround CCP controls placed on Islamic observance, an important cultural touchstone for the predominantly Turkic Muslim communities of XUAR. Memories of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when mosques were closed, clerics jailed, and believers persecuted run deep. The relative freedom of religion permitted by more liberal government policies since the 1980s brought a revival of Islamic cultural and religious life. Since the 1990s, however, the CCP has placed increasingly tight restrictions on religious observance in XUAR, viewing such activities as a locus for disruption. Even prior to the current campaigns – both in Xinjiang and the nationwide campaign for the sinicisation of religion – controls on Islam in the region often far exceeded those placed on Islamic congregations elsewhere in the PRC. Uyghurs and other non-Han groups have also expressed deep concern over the ongoing removal of support for education in their native languages since the 2000s.¹⁷

1990–2009: Increasing unrest in XUAR

Gathering data on the scale and frequency of violent incidents in XUAR is challenging given the general lack of transparency and access. Chinese sources have a vested interest in portraying such incidents in the harshest manner possible; despite this, scholars and analysts generally concur that there is next to no evidence for terror organisations within the PRC, or any transnational links.¹⁸

Nevertheless, it is possible to piece together a pattern of increasing unrest since the 1990s, including mass demonstrations, riots, and violent attacks on security forces, often perpetrated by lone individuals.¹⁹ The July 2009 violence in Ürümqi, the capital city of XUAR, can be viewed as a turning point in CCP policy

¹⁶ Jo Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance – Uyghur Identities and Uyghur–Han Relations in Contemporary Xinjiang* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2013) and; Nimrod Baranovitch, ‘The Impact of Environmental Pollution on Ethnic Unrest in Xinjiang: A Uyghur Perspective’, *Modern China*, 45:5 (2019).

¹⁷ Eric T. Schluessel, ‘Bilingual education and discontent in Xinjiang’, *Central Asian Survey*, 26:2 (2007) and; Rustem Shir, ‘Resisting Chinese Linguistic Imperialism: Abduweli Ayup and the Movement for Uyghur Mother Tongue-Based Education’, Uyghur Human Rights Project, 14/05/2019, <https://bit.ly/474c2ir> (checked: 26/09/2023).

¹⁸ James Millward and Dahlia Petersen, ‘China’s System of Oppression in Xinjiang: How it Developed and How to Curb it’, Brookings Institution, 21/09/2020, <https://bit.ly/3Du7moH> (checked: 26/09/2023).

¹⁹ As a clarification, it is worth noting that incidents of unrest in XUAR have varied widely in nature – from non-violent resistance, mass peaceful demonstrations, riots sparked by police violence, lone attacks on security institutions and outposts of the state, to indiscriminate attacks on civilians which can be classed as terrorist in nature. CCP accounts often do not distinguish between different types of incidents, classifying all as ‘separatist’ or ‘extremist’. Care is needed when interpreting individual events: the author is not suggesting these incidents are all alike in nature, simply that they show a pattern of increasing regional tensions.



toward the region: peaceful demonstrations in protest against the lynching of two Uyghur workers at a factory in Guangdong turned violent in response to heavy-handed policing.²⁰ At least 197 died when Uyghur rioters then turned on Han citizens and Han vigilante groups responded by targeting Uyghurs at random. It is unknown how many Uyghurs died in reprisals, as the state only released figures for the numbers of Han killed.²¹ Mass arrests followed, accompanied by an increase in surveillance and the cutting of telecommunications to XUAR for ten months.

The ‘People’s War on Terror’ and mass repression of minorities

Post the 2009 crackdown, intrusive policing resulted in a cycle of increasing violence in which Uyghurs clashed with security forces, culminating in a series of indiscriminate attacks against civilians between 2013 and 2014. The state responded, predictably, with ever-tighter monitoring and campaigns to police ‘extremist’ behaviours.²²

During a study tour to XUAR in April 2014, immediately after a devastating attack on the Kunming railway station, Xi declared the region to be the ‘frontline and combat theatre of fighting terror, infiltration and separatism’.²³ Xi thus inaugurated a new ‘Strike Hard Against Violent Terrorism’ [严厉打击暴力恐怖活动专项行动] campaign against the ‘Three Evils’ – separatism, terrorism and extremism – in XUAR, sometimes known as the ‘People’s War on Terror’. Although defined as targeting extremism, in practice these policies have taken minority identities themselves as a threat to state security. Although Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Hui and even Han dissidents have also found themselves swept up in the all-encompassing scope of the ensuing campaign, Uyghurs have been targeted above all.

In the first stages of the ‘People’s War on Terror’ from 2014 to early 2017, biometric and DNA information was collected from Uyghurs and other non-Han *minzu* and their travel documents removed; migrant workers from the south of XUAR were required to return to their registered place of residence and banned from leaving.²⁴ CCP cadres conducted house-to-house surveys, and were ordered

²⁰ For a very detailed analysis of the events and messaging around the 2009 Ürümqi violence, see: David Tobin, *Securing China’s Northwest Frontier: Identity and Insecurity in Xinjiang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 113–138.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Sean R. Roberts, *The War on Uyghurs: China’s Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), pp. 165–170.

²³ 习近平 [Xi Jinping], Speech: ‘习近平同志在新疆考察工作期间的讲话’ [‘General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Speeches While Inspecting Xinjiang’], *The Xinjiang Papers*, 04/2014, <https://bit.ly/3Qc04O3> (checked: 26/09/2023).

²⁴ Sam Tynen, ‘Triple dispossession in northwest China’, Darren Byler, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere (eds.), *Xinjiang Year Zero*, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2022).



to search for signs of extremism. Under the ‘Becoming Family’ programme [结对成亲], civil servants were paired up with Uyghur families; the families were then required to host the cadres in their homes, with cadres tasked with reporting on the intimate details of their private lives.²⁵ Headscarves were banned, alongside other measures intended to promote ‘de-extremification’; from 2016, the CCP began to push for the ‘sinicisation’ of religion, a broad campaign which seeks to ensure religions are adapted to Chinese society and the party’s ideology appropriately.²⁶ At this stage, closed ‘re-education’ facilities began to be established, with relatively small clusters of individuals who had been identified as ‘focus persons’ targeted for ‘transformation through education’ [教育转化].²⁷

In 2017, the campaign escalated dramatically under Chen Quanguo, who was appointed as Party Secretary of XUAR in August of that year and held the position until 2021. Chen had overseen a dramatic expansion of the security state, hiring personnel, establishing grid-style policing and installing AI-powered surveillance systems across XUAR cities. Mass indiscriminate detentions of Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities began alongside this expansion.

Although international attention has inevitably been focused on mass extra-legal detentions in ‘Education and Training Centres’ [教育培训中心], detention in such facilities must be understood as only the most well-known facet of a holistic system intended to surveil, control and transform citizens.²⁸ Extensive, AI-enabled surveillance tracks every aspect of a person’s life, offline and online, ensuring that even when not detained physically, it is impossible to escape the reach of the state.²⁹ Forced labour programmes are threaded through the entire system – from the factories built into prisons and so-called vocational training centres, to poverty alleviation campaigns intended to transform rural areas.

Mass incarcerations

²⁵ “‘Hundred Questions and Hundred Examples’: Cadre Handbooks in the Fanghuiju Campaign’, University of British Columbia, No date, <https://bit.ly/3Y4fNAX> (checked: 26/09/2023).

²⁶ ‘习近平：全面提高新形势下宗教工作水平’ [‘Xi Jinping: Comprehensively Improve Religious Work Under the New Situation’], 新华社 [Xinhua], 23/04/2016, <https://bit.ly/45Xqg3z> (checked: 26/09/2023).

²⁷ Adrian Zenz, “‘Thoroughly reforming them towards a healthy heart attitude’: China’s political re-education campaign in Xinjiang’, *Central Asian Survey*, 38:1 (2019), pp. 105–115.

²⁸ Commonly called ‘re-education camps’ in English, the Chinese terminology for these institutions varies: many, but not all, are titled vocational training centres. In some instances, camps have been renamed to avoid sensitive keywords and disguise the carceral intent of the facilities.

²⁹ Darren Byler, *In the Camps: Life in China’s High-Tech Penal Colony* (New York: Columbia Global Reports 2022).

Based on previous surveys of population, individuals who were thought to have shown signs of ‘extremism’ were either sent for ‘re-education’ or detained within the formal prison system. It is thought that over a million may have been detained in camps, while official statistics show that half a million people have been formally prosecuted in XUAR since 2017, with more likely to be held in pre-trial detention centres.³⁰ Analysis suggests those tried will have received lengthy prison sentences, as the PRC maintains a national conviction rate of roughly 99.9%.³¹

Once within the carceral system, detainees often slip between different forms of detention – whilst some detainees were eventually released from the internment camps, others were released only to house arrest. Others first incarcerated in camps were sent on to vocational training programmes or factory assignments; many were delivered into the formal prison system via *ad hoc* trials held in camp. Survivors and eyewitnesses have reported appalling conditions in both camps and prisons, with numerous accounts of rape, torture, and other forms of maltreatment.³²

The vast majority of those detained were not accused of any recognisable crime – simply of ‘pre-crime’. Lists of the detained and primers for the police to identify extremism later obtained show that the signs sufficient to justify detention included merely having foreign contacts, wearing a beard, owning a Quran, wearing the veil or having too many children. Many have been detained after being flagged by the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) [一体化联合作战平台], an algorithmic platform which predicts the likelihood of an individual having extremist tendencies based on mass surveillance data.³³ The scale of detentions is such that, in some instances, as much as 40% of some village populations have been detained in some form.³⁴

³⁰ Gene A. Bunin, ‘The Elephant in XUAR: II. Brand new prisons, expanding old prisons, and hundreds of thousands of new inmates’, *The Art of Life in Chinese Central Asia*, 04/01/2021, <https://bit.ly/44XNaqN> (checked: 26/09/2023) and; Jessica Batke, ‘Where Did the One Million Figure for Detentions in Xinjiang’s Camps Come From?’, *China File*, 08/01/2019, <https://bit.ly/44GNPNE> (checked: 26/09/2023).

³¹ ‘Prosecutions abandoned, conviction rate record high, and more on China’s judiciary 2022’, *Safeguard Defenders*, 25/07/2023, <https://bit.ly/45gp63b> (checked: 26/09/2023).

³² For evidence submitted to the Uyghur Tribunal held in 2021, see: ‘Evidence’, *Uyghur Tribunal*, 27/11/2021, <https://bit.ly/3smEIUG> (checked: 26/09/2023). The Xinjiang Victims Database also maintains a directory of eyewitness accounts from camp and prison survivors, see: *Xinjiang Victims Database*, No date, <https://bit.ly/3KfkPoa> (checked: 26/09/2023).

³³ For a collection of training materials for cadres, white papers and other documents, see: ‘Xinjiang Documentation Project’, *University of British Columbia*, No date, <https://bit.ly/3YaDBDo> (checked: 26/09/2023). On the Karakax List, see: Adrian Zenz, ‘The Karakax List: Dissecting the Anatomy of Beijing’s Internment Drive in Xinjiang’, *Journal of Political Risk*, 8:2 (2020). On justifications for detentions more broadly, see: David Tobin, ‘“The Xinjiang Papers”: How Xi Jinping Commands Policy in the People’s Republic of China’, 17/05/2022, <https://bit.ly/3OLEoqW> (checked: 26/09/2023).

³⁴ Shohret Hoshur, Alim Seytoff and Joshua Lipes, ‘Nearly Half of Uyghurs in Xinjiang’s Hotan Targeted for Re-Education Camps’, *Radio Free Asia*, 10/09/2017, <https://bit.ly/43B4mBD> (checked: 26/09/2023).

Forced labour

Forced labour is an intrinsic part of this system, but it too comes in multiple forms. ‘Reform-through-labour’ [劳动改造] is a long-held principle of Maoist thought, wherein labour purifies and opens the mind to transformation. Labour is threaded through the carceral system: formal prisons in the PRC have always included prison factories, notorious for their brutal conditions, and evidence suggests many detainees in camps are required to work in factories either in the camps or nearby.³⁵ However, beyond labour tied into the carceral system, millions of XUAR citizens have been coerced into participating in ‘labour transfer’ programmes as part of ‘poverty alleviation’ work. The programme is justified as promoting development by ending underemployment; citizens who take labour transfers are dispatched to work on farms and factories across XUAR and the other provinces of the PRC.³⁶

This programme has expanded substantially in recent years, with the XUAR government reporting 3.2 million labour transfers in 2021.³⁷ The refusal to accept a labour transfer assignment is considered to be a sign of extremism – individuals who refuse assignments can be detained. The system is ‘tantamount to the forcible transfer of populations, forced labour, human trafficking and enslavement by international definitions and protocols.’³⁸

Cultural transformation and indoctrination

Mass detentions have been accompanied by forced cultural transformation programmes. The patriotic indoctrinations provided in Education and Transformation Centres are one form of ‘re-education’. Through programmes such as ‘Becoming Family’ [结对认亲] and other coercive measures, Uyghurs have been compelled to celebrate Han festivals and participate in Han cultural activities, even as cadres report on those who wear traditional dress or observe religious practices whilst doing so.³⁹ The detention of cultural elites and intellectuals indicates the extent to which the state has come to consider Uyghur identity itself as a threat in need of rectification. Recent confirmation that

³⁵ The Forced Labour Lab at the Helena Kennedy Centre has produced a series of reports on forced labour in XUAR, with overviews and industry-specific breakdowns of policy. See: ‘Forced Labour Lab’, Sheffield Hallam University, No date, <https://bit.ly/44WWCLa> (checked: 26/09/2023).

³⁶ ‘Uyghurs for sale: “Re-education”, forced labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang’, International Cyber Policy Centre, 28/02/2020, <https://bit.ly/3ODIGk9> (checked: 26/09/2023).

³⁷ ‘Forced Labour in the Uyghur Region: The Evidence, Issue Brief 1’, Sheffield Hallam University, 03/07/2023, <https://bit.ly/3YmLeGB> (checked: 26/09/2023).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Darren Byler, ‘Images in Red: Han Culture, Uyghur Performers, Chinese New Year’, *Art of Life in Chinese Central Asia*, 23/02/2018, <https://bit.ly/3DuuMdA> (checked: 26/09/2023).

academic Professor Rahile Dawut, an internationally-recognised expert on Uyghur folklore and tradition, has been sentenced to life in prison for ‘splittism’ [分裂主义] indicates the all-pervasive nature of the attack on Uyghur culture.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the Uyghur language has been banned in schools and Uyghur gatherings prohibited.⁴¹ The widespread destruction of religious sites and graveyards is simply another form of attack on the bastions of Uyghur identity; the broad definitions of ‘extremism’ employed by the state have rendered any religious observance largely impossible. The resettlement of villages, razing of historic neighbourhoods, and expropriation of nomad lands, often justified in developmental terms, also functions as a method of breaking community bonds, isolating individuals and preventing cultural transmission.⁴²

The CCP has also further provided incentives for inter-ethnic marriage, while there are numerous accounts of women being coerced into marriage or into divorcing a detained partner.⁴³ The children of the incarcerated, meanwhile, are sent to state-run orphanages – separated from their families, to be educated in Chinese entirely.⁴⁴ This systematic attack on Uyghur identity has been described as cultural genocide.⁴⁵ Adrian Zenz, Director in China Studies at the Victims of Communist Memorial Foundation (2019–), further argues that the state is pursuing a genocidal strategy of ‘population optimisation’ in XUAR through altering the ethnic balance of the population by preventing ethnic minority births, thereby increasing the Han proportion of the population, something also achieved in part by forced sterilisation of Uyghur women. This physical destruction of population would qualify as genocide under international law.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ ‘Life Sentence for Professor Rahile Dawut Confirmed’, Dui Hua, 21/09/2023, <https://bit.ly/46iX7jQ> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁴¹ Dale Berning Sawa, “‘This is our voice’: The Uyghur traditions being erased on China’s cultural crackdown”, *The Guardian*, 10/12/2021, <https://bit.ly/44GIV4p> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁴² Guldana Salimjan, ‘Camp land: Settler ecotourism and Kazakh removal in contemporary Xinjiang’, Darren Byler, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere (ed.), ‘Xinjiang Year Zero’, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2022).

⁴³ ‘Forced Marriage of Uyghur Women: State Policies for Interethnic Marriages in East Turkistan’, Uyghur Human Rights Project, 16/11/2022, <https://bit.ly/3Y5fEwA> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁴⁴ Adrian Zenz, ‘Break Their Roots: Evidence for China’s Parent-Child Separation Campaign in Xinjiang’, *The Journal of Political Risk*, 7:7 (2019).

⁴⁵ Jo Smith Finley, ‘Why Scholars and Activists Increasingly Fear a Uyghur Genocide in Xinjiang’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 23:3 (2021).

⁴⁶ Adrian Zenz, ‘Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP’s Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang’, The Jamestown Foundation, 27/06/2020, <https://bit.ly/3rLCBsL> (checked: 26/09/2023); Adrian Zenz, “‘End the dominance of the Uyghur ethnic group’: an analysis of Beijing’s population optimisation strategy in southern Xinjiang”, *Central Asian Survey*, 40:3 (2021), pp. 291–312 and; Sir Geoffrey Nice et al., ‘Uyghur Tribunal Judgement’, Uyghur Tribunal, 09/12/2021, <https://bit.ly/3EmpqBu> (checked: 26/09/2023).

‘Standardising counter-terror’: A new era for XUAR?

Ma Xingrui was appointed to the position of Party Secretary of XUAR in December 2021 as replacement for the previous incumbent Chen, who had become indelibly associated with the most draconian phase of the mass detentions. Ma’s remit is development, and his appointment appears intended to promote a new, softer phase for XUAR governance, drawing on Ma’s previous experience in technological powerhouse Guangdong.⁴⁷

Xi’s visit to the region in July 2022 provided photo opportunities designed to signal the success of the previous de-extremification campaigns, showing Xi surrounded by smiling, colourfully-dressed citizens.⁴⁸ Since then, PRC state media and CCP messaging has tried to project the idea that XUAR has returned to normal and is open for business.⁴⁹ Domestic papers have celebrated visits made by diplomats from Muslim countries and Islamic scholars as vindication of the CCP’s counter-terrorism policy, while social media campaigns in Chinese and English portray the delights of holidaying in XUAR.⁵⁰

However, Ma’s own speeches have repeatedly emphasised ‘standardising counter-terrorism’, signalling that the securitisation of the region and the concomitant systems of enclosure and forced labour remain in place – and are intended to remain so for the long-term.⁵¹ The PRC announced that all ‘re-education’ facilities had been closed in 2019, but higher security detention facilities across the region continue to expand.⁵² Indeed, both ‘re-education’ and labour placements systems are becoming institutionalised, integrated into the normal functioning of XUAR

⁴⁷ Lizzi C. Lee, ‘What can we expect from Xinjiang’s new Party boss Ma Xingrui?’, *The China Project*, 29/12/2021, <https://bit.ly/3E4Xmmo> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁴⁸ ‘Xi Jinping’s inspection tour of Xinjiang’, *Xinhua*, 17/07/2022, <https://bit.ly/474kCoD> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁴⁹ Gulchehra Hoja, ‘Foreign diplomats in China treated to tour of Xinjiang and “happy” Uyghurs’, *Radio Free Asia*, 11/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/3QNSadU> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁵⁰ Eva Xiao, ‘Investing in Tourism in Xinjiang, Beijing Seeks New Ways to Control the Region’s Culture’, *China File*, 12/05/2023, <https://bit.ly/3Y8AyuX> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁵¹ 王兴瑞 [Wang Xingrui], ‘全面推动反恐维稳法治化常态化着力打造高素质专业化政法队伍’ [‘Comprehensively Promote the Standardisation and Regularisation of Counter-Terrorism and Stability Maintenance; Focus on Building High-Quality and Professionalised Political and Legal Team’], *人民网* [People’s Daily Online], 16/03/2022, <https://bit.ly/3Y6YM8K> (checked: 26/09/2023) and; Darren Byler, ‘In Xinjiang, a new normal under a new chief – and also more of the same’, *The China Project*, 02/03/2022, <https://bit.ly/3q3C5pv> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁵² Helen Ann-Smith, ‘What’s Happened to China’s Uyghur Camps?’, *Sky News*, 10/05/2023, <https://bit.ly/3Duhqyo> (checked: 26/09/2023) and; Nathan Ruser, ‘Exploring Xinjiang’s detention system’, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 24/09/2020, <https://bit.ly/3Y3H5Hj> (checked: 26/09/2023).

governance.⁵³

Although transformation programmes are likely to target individuals on a more selective basis in future, coercive labour transfers continue – and the scale of these labour transfers has been increasing, as per the 2021 figures.⁵⁴ Hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs who vanished into the carceral system remain missing and children separated from their families remain confined to state-run orphanages.

Ensuring ‘stability’ remains the core concern of the CCP: as of July 2023, a new hundred-day long ‘Strike Hard’ [严打] campaign prohibits gatherings of more than 30 people and organising parties or religious gatherings without prior approval. Reading or discussing the Quran, unless under the guidance of a CCP-approved imam, is similarly banned.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Policy in XUAR has been shaped and directed from the very heart of the CCP. Xi’s speeches have signalled repeatedly his commitment to the ‘People’s War on Terror’, the importance of CCP control over the province, and XUAR’s significance to his vision of the PRC. He has put his personal stamp on CCP ethnic policy and his thought has been disseminated to cadres throughout the system.⁵⁶

The ramifications of the ‘People’s War on Terror’ and cultural transformation programmes enacted in XUAR go far beyond the borders of the region itself. There are quotidian ways in which this is true: forced labour programmes in XUAR are enmeshed in domestic and international supply chains, while transfers of Uyghur workers into factories elsewhere in the PRC mean the use of forced labour is not confined to the physical borders of XUAR. Surveillance technologies and techniques of governance developed in Xinjiang are being applied elsewhere in the PRC – and sold overseas, in the case of algorithmically enabled surveillance systems developed by private companies for state ends.

The CCP has repeatedly rejected any criticism of its XUAR policy, utilising a spectrum of responses ranging from official denials and stonewalling through to social media misinformation campaigns. In addition to the rejection of criticism,

⁵³ Adrian Zenz, ‘Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning: New Trends in Xinjiang’s Coercive Labor Placement Systems’, The Jamestown Foundation, <https://bit.ly/3YKg4ZH> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Mehriban, ‘China conducts a 100-day “strike hard” campaign against Uyghurs’, *Radio Free Asia*, 14/07/2023, <https://bit.ly/3Y8KPah> (checked: 26/09/2023).

⁵⁶ David Tobin, ‘“The Xinjiang Papers”: How Xi Jinping Commands Policy in the People’s Republic of China’, 17/05/2022, <https://bit.ly/3OLEoqW> (checked: 26/09/2023).



Uyghurs outside the PRC's borders have been subjected to extensive campaigns of transnational repression. Such campaigns often seek to use relatives in XUAR as leverage over Uyghurs overseas, to bribe or threaten those individuals into compliance.

Assimilationist campaigns are also targeting other minorities elsewhere in the PRC. Campaigns for 'Sinicisation', which have targeted Tibetans, Mongols, Muslims and other religious groups, share logic with cultural genocide in XUAR. Examples include the system of mandatory residential boarding schools for Tibetan children, and the Sincisation of mosques and religious practice in Hui communities.

With these facts in mind, it is important that policymakers in the UK and other free and open countries:

- Continue to raise human rights issues in multilateral forums and counter CCP misinformation;
- Provide additional support for diaspora and exile communities – both in terms of pathways to secure residence outside the PRC and for cultural and community building initiatives;
- Develop transparent solutions to avoid culpability in the mass exploitation of workers in XUAR; and,
- Counter the existence and expansion of repression targeting of individuals elsewhere in the PRC.



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About the author

Dr. Hannah Theaker is Lecturer in History and Politics at the University of Plymouth, and a Visiting Fellow to the Dickson Poon China Centre at the University of Oxford. Her work explores the present and past of Islam in China, including the contemporary state campaigns for the 'sinicisation' of Islam in China and modern histories of empire, rebellion, ethnicity and resettlement in northwest China.

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Address: 14 Old Queen Street, Westminster, London, SW1H 9HP

Phone: 020 3915 5625

Email: info@geostrategy.org.uk

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