

State discourses and effects of “Ethnic Extinction”

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As the Chinese political theory scholar David Tobin has shown in a recent book, the term “ethnic extinction” — or *mínzú xiāowáng* 民族消亡 — first appeared as a state-promoted social project following large-scale violence in 2009 in the Uyghur region.²

Ethnic Extinction in Textbooks and Ethnic Studies Scholarship

Tobin demonstrates that following the 2009 Urumchi protests, a discourse that centered on erasing ethnic difference through a program of cultural elimination began to emerge. This forcible campaign stood in contrast to an older incentive-based “ethnic assimilation” policy that held that a combination of Han settlement and economic development would gradually erode Uyghur ethnic distinctiveness. Now in high school and vocational college textbooks the Xinjiang Education Bureau called for the “transcendent ethnicity” of the Han to fuse with the “backward” Uyghur identity, pulling it into the “highest stage” of its development: “extinction.” And replacing it with a new “higher level” identification with the Chinese nation and a Chinese ethnicity. In fact, they were calling for an identity that was dominated by Han norms and Chinese language.

This rhetoric did not stay in Xinjiang policy documents and education texts. Instead, it was taken up by a so-called second generation of Beijing-based, mostly Han, ethnic studies scholars and policymakers, who envisioned a strong Chinese identity centered around a Han ethno-nation. While they advocated the continued limited use of minority languages in the Chinese education system in the short-term, over time they envisioned a “modern” Chinese identity, figured as inevitable and value-neutral, that would eliminate minority ethnicity language use.

One of these scholars, Ma Rong, who received his PhD in sociology from Brown University before returning to China, advocated that minority ethnicities should be stripped of formal political recognition and their schools become monolingual like the education system of the United States. Ma differed from other leading scholars such as Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe in terms of how quickly the process should be accomplished.³ But like Hu and Hu, he did not appear to recognize that the lack of educational autonomy protections for Native Americans, the social position that most closely resembles the Uyghurs, especially a “residential school” system, contributed to the erasure of Native American identities. Instead, as the anthropologist Timothy Grose has shown in another recent book, Ma and others advocated for a school system that closely resembled the settler colonial education system used in the United States and Canada.⁴ They called for a shift from a more loosely defined system of interaction, where differences were

¹ This statement is a revised and condensed version of an article titled “‘Ethnic extinction’ in northwest China” that first appeared in the journal *SupChina* on July 7, 2021.

² <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/securing-chinas-northwest%20frontier/417E88E45DFE0D7E2800E7B94B25A019#fndtn-information>

³ https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/elliott/files/elliott_tcj_case_of_the_missing_indigene__1.pdf

⁴ <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2020/05/06/negotiating-inseparability-in-china-timothy-grose/>

recognized and permitted, to an enforced program of integration that denied the autonomy of “local interests.” In an influential 2013 article Hu and Hu argued explicitly that “the bedrock of the Chinese Dream is the integration of the peoples of China into a single nation-race.”⁵ Over the span of several years this scholarship began to inform frontier education policy.⁶ Working in tandem with emergent Chinese policing theory and a newly developed counter-terrorism industry,⁷ it was operationalized as an aspect of the 2014 Xinjiang de-extremification campaign.

The “reeducation camps” and associated factories that were built by the Xinjiang Public Security Bureaus across the region beginning in 2015 should be seen as at least a partial outcome of this education policy. Like reform schools and workhouses that incarcerated Native Americans and other ethnic and racial minorities in North America, the ostensible goals of the camps are to teach detainees language skills, belief systems, and industrial discipline.

Uyghur children from across the region were immersed in a “bilingual” education system that sets out to eliminate local native languages and traditions, with focused teaching of Mandarin. This part of the “ethnic extinction” process was enforced by removing children from their homes and transferring them to members of another ethnic group, the Han majority. First, nearly all schools above eighth grade became residential schools, where students are held behind walls except on weekend home visits. Then, beginning in 2017, many elementary schools and nurseries also became residential schools.⁸ In this way, Uyghur children of all ages were increasingly separated from their parents.⁹ At the same time, as documented in thousands of job advertisements posted by government bureaus across Xinjiang, the teachers in Uyghur schools were replaced with newly hired Han elementary school teachers and daycare workers from other parts of China.¹⁰ The basic requirements for these jobs, aside from Mandarin fluency, was “support for the Party’s line, guidelines, and policies, conscientiously safeguarding the unity of the motherland, ethnic solidarity and social stability, while adamantly opposing ethnic separatism and illegal religious activities, and not believing in religion or participating in religious activities.”

A group of nearly 90,000 newly hired avowedly non-Muslim educators pushed existing state-employed Uyghur educators to the side.¹¹ In a 2020 conversation, a Uyghur woman now living in North America told me she asked her mother, a former school teacher, about the conditions of the elementary school in her home community. “She told me, ‘None of our people are teachers

⁵ <https://www.cnki.com.cn/article/cjfdtotal-qhdz201304013.htm>

⁶ https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/elliott/files/elliott_tcj_case_of_the_missing_indigene__1.pdf

⁷ <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2019/10/25/preventative-policing-as-community-detention-in-northwest-china/>

⁸ <http://www.jpolrisk.com/break-their-roots-evidence-for-chinas-parent-child-separation-campaign-in-xinjiang/>

⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/f0d3223a-7f4d-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d>

¹⁰ <https://archive.fo/jm3WW>

¹¹ <https://archive.fo/vGIInq>

anymore. Those that are older, like me, have retired. The younger ones now work as cleaners in the school.”” In order to remain in teaching positions, Uyghurs had to prove they could speak and teach Chinese language with near-native fluency and have spotless family backgrounds. For most Uyghur educators, this was simply impossible.

Uyghur children across the region are now effectively raised in a non-Muslim, Mandarin-speaking environment. Beginning on September 1, 2017, primary schools across the region began to change their “bilingual” curriculum to a Chinese-only “mode 2” program.¹² An announcement published by the education department of Bortala County noted, “In the end, only Chinese will be taught.”¹³

Manuals of Ethnic Extinction in Domestic Life

For Uyghurs and Kazakhs on watchlists, primarily those who are the relatives of prisoners and detainees, the reeducation campaign is even more intensive. The Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs has assigned civil servants to serve as monitors for this targeted population. These 1.1 million civil servants are instructed to describe themselves as “relatives” of the Muslim families to which they are assigned.¹⁴ The manuals they use tell them to make sure that the families are not practicing Islam, that they profess their loyalty to the government, and that their children are learning Chinese.¹⁵ They are to ensure that Uyghurs do not perform life rituals like marriages and funerals in traditional ways outside the control of the state. They also tell them to “comfort” the families during the difficulty of the campaign.¹⁶ But often these exercises in comfort amount to sessions where Uyghurs are told what to think and feel. They appear to be efforts to reaffirm Party doctrine and make Han people feel good about all they have done to “save” Muslims.¹⁷ Yet as much as Han control has always been a central element of the People’s Republic of China, the unabashed push for Han dominance has become much more explicit under the Xi Jinping administration. As Tobin shows in his book, during Mao Zedong’s time, “ethnic extinction” was a solely negative project associated with the Chinese Nationalists who would later flee to Taiwan and Western imperial colonial projects. Mao, in fact warned against Han ethnocentrism, something he referred to as Han chauvinism. As he put it in a 1953 Party directive, “We must go to the root and criticize the Han chauvinist ideas which exist to a serious degree among many Party members and cadres.”¹⁸ Instead, the Chinese Communists must strive, he argued, to help other nationalities achieve their own communist autonomy.

¹² <http://archive.fo/6F86b>

¹³ <https://archive.fo/cSv4w>

¹⁴ <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/postcard/million-citizens-occupy-uyghur-homes-xinjiang>

¹⁵ <https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/cadre-handbooks/>

¹⁶ <https://archive.fo/WkSOo>

¹⁷ <https://supchina.com/2019/05/14/saved-by-state-terror-gendered-violence-and-propaganda-in-xinjiang/>

¹⁸ https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_25.htm

The multiethnic stance of the early period of the PRC has now been openly reversed. In December 2020, a Han official was placed in charge of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission for the first time in 66 years.¹⁹ This legal body was set up explicitly to defend the rights of minorities. In 2019, the State Council Information Office issued a white paper on Uyghur history that stated directly that Uyghurs are not a Turkic people, that Islam is not their “natural” religion, and that maintaining normative halal standards was anti-civilization.²⁰ It appears now as though an unapologetically Chinese ethno-state is here to stay.

The harms of Chinese ethnonationalism are most sharply felt in Xinjiang. Not only has it produced mass imprisonment of as many as 1 in 10 Uyghur men, family separation that results from internment and residential boarding schools has become endemic.²¹ In Uyghur villages the education policy combined with the broader “de-extremification” campaign has targeted the basic material forms of Uyghur history. A historian of Uyghur material culture, Rian Thum, has also shown that the Chinese government has bulldozed over 100 graveyards across the region as part of a state project to “standardize” burial practices. Thum argues that “the desecration of shrines, the forced reordering of household space, and the demolition of cities in the name of modernity, civilization, and development have all been common tactics of conquering empires and, especially, settler colonial projects around the world.”²²

For Uyghurs, ethnic identity is built from the place where they are born and their ancestors are buried. The priorness of being rooted in a place, and all of the claims to self-determination that such a position entails, is what makes it a primary target of elimination by the “reeducation” system in the Uyghur region. Drawing on examples ranging from North America to Australia, the historian Patrick Wolfe notes that “settler colonialism destroys to replace.”²³ Ethnic extinction is not just about desecration, in some ways it is also about making something new. Through this process, Uyghur land is remade into Chinese property, and Uyghur behavior is controlled and ordered by the state. The standardization of Uyghur funeral practices is a way of reclaiming Uyghur cemetery space for real estate development, “happiness” park construction, and parking lots, and, in some cases, simply blank space. Bulldozed graveyards are also physical manifestations of ethnic extinction.

In a 2018 interview, a Han government official told a reporter that what is happening to the Uyghurs was specific to them.²⁴ “They just don’t have human rights,” he said. Ethnic extinction

¹⁹ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3114638/china-puts-han-official-charge-ethnic-minority-affairs-beijing>

²⁰ https://web.archive.org/web/20201005142750/http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_8013442.htm

²¹ <https://livingotherwise.com/2021/01/04/the-elephant-in-the-xuar-ii-brand-new-prisons-expanding-old-prisons-and-hundreds-of-thousands-new-inmates/>

²² <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2020/08/24/the-spatial-cleansing-of-xinjiang-mazar-desecration-in-context/>

²³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623520601056240>

²⁴ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/china-undercover/transcript/>

is often framed as a kind of dissipation, a disappearance of a minority into the majority group. But, because Uyghurs have now been marked as undeserving of the protections of the common people — the *laobaixing* — ethnic extinction, at least for many, is a process of demolition. This in turn is destroying the space of class-based solidarity between Han and Uyghurs. The space of dissonant fusion where ethnic difference is recognized and protected is likewise on the brink of extinction.