

China

DRU C. GLADNEY

The Turkic people known as Uyghur will most likely be in the same situation at the beginning of the next millennium as they have been for most of this one: an internally colonized people, subject to the Chinese nation-state. How this came to be and how it might cease to be so is the subject of this article. I argue that it is through the model of internal colonialism that we might begin to understand how it is the Uyghur, and other indigenous peoples such as Tibetans, now labelled as 'minority nationalities,' have been turned into 'internal colonial subjects' despite being indigenous peoples in lands they once called their own. Through initial occupation, gradual integration through immigration, and finally 'minoritization' as a result of nationality policy, the Uyghur (and perhaps many others like them) have been internally colonized by the Chinese state.

The categorization and taxonomization of all levels of Chinese society, from political economy, to class, to gender, to religion, to ethnicity and nationality represents a wide-ranging and ongoing project of internal colonialism. Though now long subsided, the debate provoked by Michael Hechter's (1976) history, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966*, led scholars to consider applying Hechter's model to many other societies beyond England and Ireland. Hechter suggests that the channelling of certain peoples into 'hierarchical cultural divisions of labor' under colonial administrations led to the development of ethnic identities which superseded class. This 'internal colonialism' is predicated upon the unequal rates of exchange between the urban power-centres and the peripheral, often ethnic, hinterlands. In his study of 'The Celtic Fringe,' Hechter traces the national development of the post-colonial British state, as though these areas were still under economic colonial exploitation.

Internal colonialism was found to be applicable to South Africa, Thailand, Sudan, Wales, Brittany, Quebec, Austria-Hungary (as it was formerly), Scotland, Bangladesh, Cherokee Native Americans, Chicanos in America, the Palestinians in Israel, and the original intent behind and reason for the success of Stalin's nationalities policy in the Soviet Union (Gouldner 1978:11-14). The majority of these examples stress the exploitation of the many ethnics, who are less culturally literate in the dominant tradition, by the few urban power elite who control access to and distribution of capital. Interestingly, though the theory was later criticized and generally abandoned for being too general and too widely applicable, it was never applied to China. It is quite ironic that while the People's Republic was founded on an 'anti-imperial nationalism' (Friedman 1994), in the current postcolonial world, at a time when most nations are losing territory rather than recovering it, China is busily making good its claims on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Spratleys, as well as jealously guarding its border territories.

### Uyghur Ethnogenesis and Internal Colonialism

Chinese histories notwithstanding, every Uyghur firmly believes that their ancestors were the indigenous people of the Tarim basin, now known as Xinjiang. The Uyghur were recognized as a nationality in the 1930s in Xinjiang under a Soviet-influenced policy of nationality recognition that contributed to a widespread acceptance today of continuity with the ancient Uyghur kingdom and their eventual 'ethnogenesis' as a *bona fide* nationality. While rebellions by Yakub Beg in the late 19th century, and the short-lived establishments of the Eastern Turkestan Republics (TIRET) in Kashgar in 1933 and Yining in 1944, indicated Uyghur attempts at resisting expanding Chinese colonialism, these efforts failed just as those of the Uzbeks and Tajiks in Czarist and Soviet Central Asia.

# Internal Colonialism and China's Uyghur Muslim Minority

'Minoritization' of the Uyghur became objectified when they were recognized by the Chinese state in 1950 as the Uyghur nationality, and the region was recognized as the Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1956. Chinese practices of 'integration through immigration' has meant the in-migration of Han Chinese since the 1950s, with populations increasing from an estimated 5 percent in 1940 to 38 percent in 1990. They then become known not as an indigenous people attached to a region once their own, but one of 55 minority nationalities in China, with a documented population of 7.2 million in 1990 (with 98 percent, or 7.1 million in Xinjiang alone). The Uyghurs are one of ten mainly Muslim nationalities, with a total Muslim population in China of nearly 20 million. The expropriation of Xinjiang's vast mineral and petrochemical resources, with processing of petroleum products in the interior, primarily Lanzhou, and sold on the international market (with revenues to Xinjiang based on domestic prices) further fits the internal colonialism model (see Dorian, Wigdortz, Gladney 1997). Finally, the development of the tourist industry in the region as a 'silk road' destination follows the line of touristic development in the minority areas that Oakes (1995) has also analysed as the results of 'internal colonialism' in the Southwest. The constructed indigeneity of the Uyghur poses an alternative to Chinese historiographies of the region, which is consonant with 'internal' colonizing powers seeking to assert authority in a region not previously their own.

### Chinese Nationalism and its Implications for Minorities

After denying them for decades and stressing instead China's 'national unity,' official reports have recently detailed Tibetan and Muslim conflicts in the border regions of Tibet, Yunnan, Xinjiang, Ningxia, and Inner Mongolia. With the March 7, 1997 bus bombings in Beijing, widely attributed (though never verified) to Uyghur separatists, coupled with the Urumqi bus bombings on the day of Deng Xiaoping's 1997 memorial on February 25 (killing nine people), Beijing can no longer keep them secret. The Yining (Ghulja) uprising from February 2-7, 1997 that left at least twenty-five dead and hundreds injured and arrested, has been heavily covered by the world's media. This distinguishes the last few events from on-going problems in the region in the mid-1980s that have previously met with little media coverage.

The government responded with a host of random arrests and new policy announcements. In Spring 1998, the National Peoples Congress passed a New Criminal Law that redefined 'counter-revolutionary' crimes to be 'crimes against the state,' liable to severe prison terms and even execution. Included in 'crimes against the state' were any actions considered to involve 'ethnic discrimination' or 'stirring up anti-ethnic sentiment.' Many human rights activists have argued that this is a thinly veiled attempt to criminalize 'political' actions and to make them appear as illegal as traffic violations, supporting China's claims that it holds 'no political prisoners.' Since any minority activity could be regarded as stirring 'anti-ethnic feeling,' many ethnic activists are concerned that the New Criminal Law will be

easily turned against them. At the same time, Han Chinese who stir up ethnic problems can also be arrested.

Chinese authorities are correct in their assumption that increasing international attention to the plight of indigenous border peoples has put pressure on the regions. Notably, the chair of the Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization (UNPO) based in the Hague is the Uyghur, Erkin Alptekin, son of the Uyghur Nationalist leader, Isa Yusuf Alptekin. There are at least five international organizations working for the independence of Xinjiang, known as Eastern Turkestan, and based in Amsterdam, Munich, Istanbul, Melbourne, and New York. Clearly, with Xinjiang representing the last Muslim region under Communism, Chinese authorities have more to be concerned about than just international support for Tibetan independence.

### Internal Colonialism and Muslim Separatism

Practically speaking, China is not threatened in the near future by the loss of its 'internal colonies.' Such as they are, China's separatists are small in number, poorly equipped, loosely linked, and vastly out-gunned by the People's Liberation Army and People's Police. Local support for separatist activities, particularly in Xinjiang, is ambivalent and ambiguous at best, given the economic disparity between these regions and their foreign neighbours, which are generally much poorer and in some cases such as Tajikistan, riven by civil war. Memories in the region are strong of mass starvation and widespread destruction during the Sino-Japanese and civil war in the first half of this century, not to mention the chaotic horrors of the Cultural Revolution. China's economic progress is an important check on Uyghur secessionism: the nearby alternatives are still not that enviable. International support for Tibetan causes has done little to shake Beijing's grip on the region. Many local activists are calling not for complete separatism or real independence, but more often issues express concerns over environmental degradation, anti-nuclear testing, religious freedom, over-taxation, and recently imposed limits on child bearing. Many ethnic leaders are simply calling for 'real' autonomy according to Chinese law for the five Autonomous Regions that are each led by First Party Secretaries who are all Han Chinese controlled by Beijing.

Recent moves suggest efforts to promote Chinese nationalism as a 'unifying ideology' that will prove more attractive than communism and more manageable than capitalism. By highlighting separatist threats and external intervention, China can divert attention away from its own domestic instabilities of natural disasters (especially the recent flooding), economic crises (such as the Asian economic downturns drag on China's currency), rising inflation, increased income disparity, displaced 'floating populations,' Hong Kong integration, Taiwan reunification, and the other many internal and external problems facing Jiang Zemin's government. As Bruce Kapferer has noted, nationalism 'makes the political religious.' This is perhaps why religiously-based nationalisms, like Islamic Fundamentalism and Tibetan Buddhism, are targeted by Beijing, while the rise of shamanism and popular religion goes unchecked. At the same time,

a firm lid on Muslim activism in China sends a message to foreign Muslim militant organizations to stay out of China's internal affairs, and the Taliban to stay well within their Afghan borders. In a July 1994 interview with Iran's former ambassador to China in Tehran, I was told that Iran would never intervene in a Muslim crackdown in China, despite its support for the training of Kubrawiyah Sufi Imams from Gansu and close foreign relations with China.

In a recent visit to the U.S., Defense Minister Chi Haotian, declared: 'We hope to see a peaceful settlement [regarding Taiwan] yet refuse to renounce the use of force – The entire Chinese history shows that whoever splits the motherland will end up condemned by history.' This follows the new Chinese History Project launched by Song Jian, Minister of Science and Technology, aimed at writing a new chronology of China. In a *Science and Technology Daily* editorial, published May 17, 1997, Song Jian stated that the project's goal was to demonstrate its 6,000 year 'unbroken, unilinear' development. 'Unlike those in Egypt, Babylon and India,' Song declared, 'the Chinese civilization has lasted for 5,000 years without a break.' The project, to be completed by October 1, 1999, clearly will take a dim view of anyone accused of separatism. As long as Muslim activism is regarded as 'separatism,' it will be seen not only as going against China's national destiny, but against history itself. Xinjiang, in this scenario, becomes just one of many former internal colonies to be dissolved into the advancing Chinese state, rather than the ancestral home known to the Uyghurs as Uyghuristan. ♦

*Dr Dru C. Gladney is professor of Asian Studies and Anthropology, University of Hawai'i.*

*The opinions in this article are the author's alone.*

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