

POLICY BRIEF

China's official narratives on Xinjiang: Interethnic mingling, economic prosperity and religious terrorism

The northwest region of Xinjiang in the People's Republic of China has drawn international attention recently because of state-perpetrated violence towards its non-Han population. This paper examines how Chinese authorities construct their narratives about the Xinjiang issue and justify their actions in the region. The analysis will focus on official white papers published by the State's Council Information Office. Through the investigation of the documents, three main narratives on Xinjiang will be presented, together with the way in which they have developed over the past decades. Each will be then situated within the larger transformation of Chinese politics and political discourse in recent years, especially since General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping has taken office. Instead of considering Beijing's narratives on Xinjiang as an exception, this essay maintains that their underlying paradigms comply with Chinese governmental strategy as a whole, although the repression in Xinjiang represents their extreme consequences.

1. Introduction

Little known until a few years ago, the northwest province of Xinjiang in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its dominant nationality, the Uyghurs, now figure frequently in press reports worldwide. The Uyghurs are a population speaking a Turkic language and are predominantly Muslim. They are one of the 56 officially recognised ethnic groups living in the PRC, with the majority represented by the Han.

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The global attention has intensified since the emergence of mass internment camps, about which, in August 2018, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination of the United Nations expressed its concerns.¹ In the past three years there has been an escalation of intensity of the debate and research among Western governments, foreign media and scholars and international organisations on what is (still) going on in Xinjiang.² At the same time, the ‘discursive war’ between Beijing and foreign countries has heightened. The peak was reached in March 2021 when the United States, Canada, the European Union and Britain imposed sanctions on Chinese officials deemed responsible for the ‘human rights abuses’ in Xinjiang. While the US had already implemented sanctions the year before, those levied by the EU were the first since 1989, after the violent repression of the so-called Tiananmen movements.³ Chinese sanctions soon followed, targeting, among others, the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the European Union, Members of the European Parliament, research centres such as the Berlin-based think-tank, MERICS, and scholars, including Adrian Zenz and Joanne Smith Finley (Newcastle University) who have long worked on Xinjiang.⁴

Scholarly literature has already highlighted the repressive measures applied to Xinjiang in recent years: mass ‘reeducation’ camps where Uyghurs

and other non-Han nationalities are coercively detained, or at least, non-voluntarily detained, and submitted to forced labour as both a ‘poverty alleviation’ measure and a solution to ‘religious terrorism’.⁵ There have been reports of demolition of mosques, sacred shrines as well as other sites that are centres of Uyghur cultural, religious and social life;⁶ the secularisation of Xinjiang’s non-Han through Han population’s surveillance on their private life;⁷ not to mention the disappearance, imprisonment or death of many Uyghurs who dared to raise their voices on the state-perpetrated violence.⁸ These are just a few of the techniques of repression that scholars have pointed out so far.⁹

Unlike most current literature on Xinjiang that tends to emphasise the peculiarities of Beijing’s activities in the region, this analysis aims to highlight how the paradigms sustaining the official view on Xinjiang are by no means limited to this region but characterise the country’s overall strategy of governance. This paper argues that government action in Xinjiang cannot be reduced to a reaction to ‘terrorist attacks’ (as they are referred to officially) over the past decades.¹⁰ On the contrary, it posits that China’s official narrative on Xinjiang is consistent with recent developments in Chinese politics and with the development of Chinese political discourse as a whole.

- 1 Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, ‘Concluding observations on the combined fourteenth to seventeenth periodic reports of China (including Hong Kong, China and Macao, China)’, 30 August 2018 (https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/CHN/CERD_C_CHN_CO_14-17_32237_E.pdf)
- 2 Joshua Chin and Megha Rajagopalan were the first journalists who reported the repressive mechanisms implemented in Xinjiang already in 2017: Joshua Chin, ‘Twelve Days in Xinjiang: How China’s Surveillance State Overwhelms Daily Life’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 December 2017; Megha Rajagopalan, ‘This Is What A 21st-Century Police State Really Looks Like’, *BuzzFeed News*, 17 October 2017. Since 2017 many other newspapers articles and reports have been published. Furthermore, part of the debate in Western countries have centred on whether the repression in Xinjiang should be called ‘genocide’ or not. The debate is still ongoing. A three-day conference organized at Newcastle University, ‘The Xinjiang Crisis: Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity, Justice’ (1-3 September 2021) addressed this topic.
- 3 Lucas Niewenhuis, ‘EU issues first sanctions on China since 1989 over treatment of Uyghurs’, *SupChina*, 22 March 2021.
- 4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Announces Sanctions on Relevant EU Entities and Personnel’, 22 March 2021 (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1863106.shtml)
- 5 Adrian Zenz, ‘«Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude»: China’s Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang’, *Central Asian Survey*, Issue 38, No. 1, 2 January 2019, pp. 102–28.; Adrian Zenz, ‘Beyond the Camps: Beijing’s Long-term Scheme of Coercive Labor, Poverty Alleviation and Social Control in Xinjiang’, *Journal of Political Risk*, Issue 7, No. 12, 2019; Adrian Zenz, ‘The Karakax List: Dissecting the Anatomy of Beijing’s Internment Drive in Xinjiang’, *The Journal of Political Risk*, Issue 8, No. 2, 2020.
- 6 Nathan Ruser *et al.*, ‘Cultural Erasure: Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang’, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, No. 38, 2020.; Rian Thum, ‘The Spatial Cleansing of Xinjiang: Mazar Desecration in Context’, *Made in China Journal*, Issue 5, No. 2, 24 August 2020.
- 7 Darren Byler, ‘Violent Paternalism: On the Banality of Uyghur Unfreedom’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Issue 16, No. 24, 2018.
- 8 Professor Ilham Tohti is perhaps the most prominent figure who was repressed by the authorities because of his challenging the Party’s approach to developing Xinjiang and managing inter-ethnic relations. He was charged with ‘separatism’ and sentenced to life in prison.
- 9 The University of British Columbia created a website to collect primary materials and scientific studies on Xinjiang that is available at: <https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/>. Magnus Fiskesjö constantly updates the bibliography related to the repression of the Uyghurs at: <https://uhrp.org/bibliography/>
- 10 Over the past decades, there have been several violent acts that involved Uyghurs. However, from the 1990s up to 2013, no incident fits into the definition of terrorism, i.e., politically motivated violence on random civilians. Since 2013, there were attacks by Uyghurs that may be called terrorism, specifically: a vehicular attack in Tiananmen square in Beijing (October 2013); a mass knifing at the Kunming railway station (March 2014), a knife and bomb attack at the Urumqi train station (April 2014), and a vehicular and explosive attack at a market in Urumqi (May 2014). Roberts explains the escalation of the violence – some of which can fall under the category of terrorism – in terms of the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ that helps us understand how PRC’s policies against alleged ‘terrorist threats’ facilitated an increase in Uyghurs militancy. Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China’s Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020, pp. 161–98.

In addition to secondary literature, the materials used to understand how Beijing articulates its narrative on Xinjiang are the white papers (WPs, hereafter) released by State's Council Information Office and dealing specifically with Xinjiang. WPs are created by governments with the aim of communicating their standpoint and informing the public on specific issues. However, in China they are characterised mainly as a reaction to external criticism.¹¹ Indeed, the first WP Beijing ever issued was in 1991 in reply to criticism by the international community of the violent repression of the 1989 movement. The first WP pertaining specifically to Xinjiang was released in 2003. From 2003 to August 2021, 11 documents have been issued, with a growing intensity in recent years (in 2019, three WPs focusing only on Xinjiang were released). Most of the WPs are available in Chinese and English, from which it can be inferred that they aim to 'tell China's story' – quoting Xi Jinping's well-known phrase of 2013 – both abroad and at home.¹²

The results of the analysis reveal that three narratives structure China's official view: 1) the creation of the 'Chinese nation' through a new approach to interethnic relations; 2) Chinese authorities' developmentalism and China's civilising project; 3) the Xinjiang question as part of the US-led global war on terror and a new approach to 'stability maintenance'. In the following pages, each of these three narratives on Xinjiang will be explained and then situated in the larger context of contemporary Chinese political discourse. A final section will be devoted to considering the Xinjiang issue in the current centralisation of power in the hands of the CCP and its new approach to 'stability maintenance'.

2. China's official narratives on Xinjiang

2.1 A new paradigm for interethnic relations within the Chinese nation

The official narrative on Xinjiang is based on the 'three histories' (*san shi* 三史): 1) the history of Xinjiang; 2) the history of the development of ethnic minorities; 3) the history of the evolution of religions. Underlying these three histories is the view that Xinjiang has belonged to China since ancient times, a point that almost all the WPs stress. The one published in 2003 specifies that 'since the Western Han (206 BC- 24 AC) it has become an inseparable part of China's unified multi-ethnic country' and that, in 60 BC, the Han dynasty established the Western Regions Frontier Command in Xinjiang'.¹³ At the time, Xinjiang was part of the 'western territories' (*xi yu* 西域). With the founding of the People's Republic of China, Xinjiang was reportedly 'peacefully liberated' (*heping jiefang* 和平解放). This 'history of Xinjiang' is informed by the well-established assumption that the contemporary PRC is the natural heir of imperial China; China's history would be thus characterised by a political continuity that legitimises the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over Xinjiang as well as over other provinces and territories, and that makes the Chinese nation unique in the records of civilisations for its uninterrupted history of five millenniums.

Han (206 BC – 220 AD) and the Tang (618-907) empires ruled over parts of the territories that are nowadays known as Xinjiang, and the people living in those territories had quite close contents with the states commonly defined as Chinese dynasties.¹⁴ However, today's Xinjiang has not been part of all the Chinese empires, nor it has always been a unified political entity. Instead, the political identity of the region was fragmented and mainly shaped by the local oasis. The Qing empire (1644-1912) – whose rulers were clearly identified as being Manchu, thus non-Chinese – placed Xinjiang under its control.¹⁵ The PRC has built its territorial

11 Paper presented at the 23rd Biannual Conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies by Martin Lavička, 'Narrating Xinjiang through the Lens of Governmental White papers', 24 August 2021.

12 The first two white papers on Xinjiang are available only in Chinese. Since 2014 both Chinese and English versions are released. All the white papers are available at: <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/>

13 State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 新疆的历史与发展 (History and development of Xinjiang), 26 May 2003 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/2003/Document/307907/307907.htm>).

14 In using 'empire' in place of 'dynasties', I follow James Millward who has recently raised awareness on the language used to describe China's history. James Millward, 'Decolonizing Chinese Historiography with special attention to Xinjiang', Cornell University, 25 October 2021 (https://vimeo.com/639170697?fbclid=IwAR1G5qnxOSIt_YMyZijxKdYxe33iBWUUmzK3CP_Ahc2IwivP5UyJFQPyd9Ps).

15 James A. Millward & Peter C. Perdue, 'Political and Cultural History of the Xinjiang Region through the Late Nineteenth Century', in S. Frederick Starr (ed.), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2004, pp. 27-62.

sovereignty on the legacy of the Qing empire. Later, along with the consolidation of political power by the Party, 'national sovereignty' and 'territorial integrity' were elevated as two of China's non-negotiable 'national core interests',¹⁶ intimately linked to the principle of 'non-interference' in domestic affairs which has been advocated since the 1950s.¹⁷ Indeed, 'National sovereignty' and 'territorial integrity' are often cited to counter criticism of state-led violence in Xinjiang.¹⁸

Against the backdrop of a 'continuity paradigm' projected by China's state authorities, however, the relations between the various nationalities constituting the country's ethnic patchwork have seen an important evolution. In 2014, Xi delivered a speech at the Central Xinjiang Work Symposium where he specified that the long term cause of the 'Xinjiang issue' (*Xinjiang de wenti* 新疆的问题) is to reinforce unity among nationalities; to ensure it, the authorities should increase the interethnic 'contacts, exchanges and mingling' (*jiaowang, jiaoliu, jiaorong* 交往交流交融) as well as promote the 'consciousness of the community of the Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi* 中华民族共同体意识).¹⁹ After Xi's talk, both expressions started to be widely used in WPs, including the most recent one.

Xi Jinping's call for interethnic 'mingling' as a way-out to the 'Xinjiang issue' represents a turning point in China's ethnic policy.²⁰ Since its early days, the CCP committed itself to recognising the existence of ethnonational diversity within the territory of the ex-Qing empire, though the Leninist principle of self-determination and the right of secession were deleted by the CCP as soon as it gained power.²¹ This commitment by the CCP was an attempt to distinguish itself from the assimilationist approach of the Nationalist Party, i.e., Guomindang, who saw the integration of the non-Han nationalities into the Han majority as unavoidable. Instead, the newly centralised state of PRC established a system bor-

rowed from the Soviet Union, and based on autonomy for those regions populated mostly by non-Han nationalities. Xinjiang Uyghurs Autonomous Region was the product of this political stand, along with four other autonomous regions. Accordingly, over the past few decades, the central government tended to emphasise the peculiarities of each of the 55 'national minorities' (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) living in the PRC's territory, portraying itself as the guarantor of their cultural customs. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, sparked an intellectual and political debate on the validity of this system which had been erected in 1950s, because the revival of regional nationalism was cited as one of the major causes of the USSR collapse. Since the early 1990s, discussions on the need for a 'second-generation nationality policy' (*di er dai minzu zhengce* 第二代民族政策) among Chinese intellectuals emerged, with some state intellectuals such as Hu Angang, advocating for a new approach that would place more emphasis on a shared national identity, rather than on individual ethnic nationalities within China.²² Xi Jinping's speech at the Central Xinjiang Work Symposium in 2014 tacitly approved this new view on interethnic relations. Interestingly, the new approach resembles the assimilationist one advocated by the Guomindang and Sun Yatsen (the so-called 'father of the nation') from which the CCP was trying to distinguish itself.

Since 2014, interethnic 'mingling' has become a mantra in the official narrative on Xinjiang. It was also applied retrospectively, emphasising the role of 'interethnic fusion' in shaping both the Uyghurs as well as the Han. However, the formation of the Han majority is described as differing greatly from the ethnogenesis of the Uyghurs. The WPs tell us that Uyghurs are the product of 'long-term migrations and interethnic mingling' and that, despite ethno-Turkic origins, they are not descendants of Turks; only in 1934 did the name 'Uyghur' emerge as the standard Chinese appellation for the people

16 According to the white paper issued in 2011 'China's Peaceful Development', China's core interests include: 1) state sovereignty; 2) national security; 3) territorial integrity; 4) national reunification; 5) China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability; 6) basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development. State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'China issues white paper on peaceful development', 7 November 2011 (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/whitepaper_665742/t856325.shtml).

17 Jerker Hellström, 'Sovereignty / 主权, 国权', in *Decoding China* (<https://decodingchina.eu/sovereignty/>).

18 Reuters Staff, 'China tells UN rights chief to respect its sovereignty after Xinjiang comments', Reuters, 11 September 2018.

19 Xinhua, 习近平在第二次中央新疆工作座谈会上发表重要讲话 (Xi Jinping's speech at the second Central Xinjiang Work Symposium), 29 May 2014 (http://www.xinhuanet.com/photo/2014-05/29/c_126564529.htm).

20 James Leibold, 'Xinjiang Work Forum Marks New Policy of «Ethnic Mingling»', *China Brief Volume* Issue 14, No. 12, 2014, pp. 3–6.

21 On the ambiguity of the CCP towards Leninist principle of self-determination, see James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007, pp. 88–93.

22 James Leibold, 'Toward A Second Generation of Ethnic Policies?', *China Brief Volume*, Issue 12, No. 13, 2012, pp. 7–10.

residing in Xinjiang.²³ It goes without saying that this had an apparent intent of discrediting separatists' instances. It cannot be denied that Uyghurs were neither a single unitarian population nor a nationality that avoided mingling with other peoples over the centuries; yet, it should also be underlined that ethnicity did not feature so crucially, before the formation of nation-states.²⁴ Furthermore, when coming to the ethnonym *Hanzu* (汉族), which is also a neologism coined in the late 19th-early 20th century,²⁵ China's official narrative applies a different attitude. The *Hanzu* is described as being extremely ancient, so ancient that it can be traced back to centuries ago: 'The Huaxia people who appeared in the pre-Qin period, after years of integration with various other peoples, and especially after 500 turbulent years of cultural convergence in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, further integrated with other peoples in the Qin and Han dynasties, to form the Han people (*hanzu* 汉族), a majority group in the Central Plains and the major people in Chinese history'.²⁶

Leaving the debate of ethnogenesis aside, this new approach to interethnic relations goes hand in hand with a new emphasis on Chineseness and Chinese identity. The newly promoted concept of 'consciousness of the community of the Chinese nation' mentioned above leverages on the sense of belonging to a common 'Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族). This latter is an expression coined by the reformist and intellectual Liang Qichao at the beginning of the 20th century. Against the backdrop

of social Darwinism informing the intellectual-political debate of the time,²⁷ creating a 'Chinese nation-state' was conceived as the prerequisite to save the 'nation' from foreign imperialism. This idea of a 'united Chinese nation' has continued to inform China's political discourse today. However, in recent years it has acquired an even more prominent role. In 2018, the expression 'Chinese nation' was enshrined in the country's constitution, in relation to the goal of realising its 'rejuvenation' (*fuxing* 复兴),²⁸ a signature slogan under Xi Jinping which recalls Sun Yatsen's call to 'reinvigorate' (*zhenxing* 振兴) China.²⁹

'Interethnic mingling' within the 'Chinese nation' appears to be more an integral part of China's overall strategy, than just a means to solve interethnic conflicts. The 'consciousness of the community of the Chinese nation', the 'identification in Chinese culture' (*Zhonghua wenhua rentong* 中华文化认同),³⁰ the promotion of a 'China spirit' (*Zhongguo jingshen* 中国精神) (another expression which echoes Sun Yatsen's vocabulary of the early 20th century)³¹ are all indicators of an attempt to forge a nation-mindedness – with a strong Han accent – one able to 'unite' the people around the CCP, a project which goes far beyond the borders of the PRC and includes overseas Chinese.³² The success of this strategy is based, as Xi spelled out, on a direct correlation between the peoples' faith and the country's strength: 'When the people have faith, the country has strength, and the nation can have hope' (*renmin you xinyang, guojia you liliang*,

23 'Uyghur' is used also in the Chinese version of the white paper. See: State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 新疆的反恐、去极端化斗争与人权保障 (The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang), 18 March 2019 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/39911/Document/1649848/1649848.htm>).

24 Dru Gladney, 'The ethnogenesis of the Uighurs', *Cental Asian Survey*, Issue 9, No. 1, 1990, pp 1-28.

25 The name Han comes from the Han River (Hanshui) flowing from modern Shaanxi through to Hubei, where it joins the Yangzi river. Han became the name of the state founded by Liu Bang, the Han empire. However, at that time Han refers to the people under the political domination of the Han empire, without reference to culture, language or any other features bounding together the members of an ethnic group. Mark Elliott, 'Hushuo: The Northern Other and the Naming of the Han Chinese', in Mullaney, Thomas S. Leibold, James Gros, Stéphane et al. (eds.), *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 173-190.

26 State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 新疆的若干历史问题 (Historical matters concerning Xinjiang), 21 July 2019 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/39911/Document/1649848/1649848.htm>).

27 Tsing-song Vincent Shen, 'Evolutionism through Chinese Eyes: Yan Fu, Ma Junwu and Their Translations of Darwinian Evolutionism', *ASIA-Network Exchange*, Issue 22, No. 1, 2014, pp. 49–60.

28 Ma Rong, a state-intellectual, notes that 'Chinese nation' was absent in the previous versions of the PRC's Constitution before 2018. Ma Rong, 中国民族区域自治制度的历史演变轨迹 (The Historical Evolution China's System of Autonomous Ethnic Regions), *Zhongyang shehuizhuyi xueyuan xuebao*, 2019, pp. 94-101, p. 108. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China is available at: http://www.gov.cn/quoqing/2018-03/22/content_5276318.htm.

29 Orville Schell & John Delury, *Wealth and Power: China's Long March to the Twenty-first Century*, London, Little, Brown, 2013.

30 State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'The fight against terrorism and extremism and human rights protection in Xinjiang'.

31 Beatrice Gallelli, 'Jingshen 精神: A Governmental Keyword in 21st Century China', in Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova (ed.), *From Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping: The Political Discourse of China Re-examined through Discourse Analysis Theories*, London & New York, Routledge, forthcoming.

32 Sheng Ding, 'Engaging Diaspora via Charm Offensive and Indigenized Communication: An Analysis of China's Diaspora Engagement Policies in the Xi Era', *Politics*, Issue 35, No. 3–4, April 28, 2015, pp. 230–44.

minzu you xiwang 人民有信仰，国家有力量，民族有希望).³³

Indeed, in recent years, official propaganda has attempted to define the so called ‘Chinese characteristics’ and Chineseness, which, in sum, are ‘Han characteristics’, much in the same way as the ‘standard national language’ (*guojia tongyong yuyan wenzi* 国家通用语言文字) is defined as *Hanyu* (汉语), the language spoken by the Han majority, i.e., The Mandarin language.³⁴ The results of these efforts are, for instance, the ‘socialist core values’ (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan* 社会主义核心价值观) promoted since 2012, which marry values belonging to the Confucian tradition with modern principles promoted by the CCP.

The ‘socialist core values’ are also quoted in one of the WPs issued in 2019, and are placed in relation to the need of ‘Sinicize [its] religions’ (*zongjiao Zhongguohua* 宗教中国化): ‘We must carry forward the historical tradition of sinicization of religions, use the socialist core values as a guide (*yindao* 引导) and penetrate various religions in China with Chinese culture, strive to integrate religious’ teachings with Chinese culture, and actively guide various religions, including Islam, to follow the path of sinicization (*Zhongguohua* 中国化).³⁵ Before Xi, references to the process of ‘sinicization’ were made primarily with regard to the ‘sinicization of Marxism’ (*Makesizhuyi Zhongguohua* 马克思主义中国化), but, in recent years they have been applied to the religious and, interestingly, also to the ‘cultural sphere’. When Xi Jinping addressed writers and artists at the Forum on Literature and Arts in 2014, for instance, he warned against the threat of ‘de-sinicization’ (*qu Zhongguohua* 去中国化).³⁶

2.2 Promoting economic development and increasing peoples’ quality

Imbued with the evolutionist view of historical materialism, non-Han nationalities have been denigrated

as lagging behind China’s dominant ethnicity, the Han, in terms of socioeconomic development.³⁷ This view has been, since the founding of the PRC, the leitmotiv of Beijing’s approach to non-Han nationalities, including the Uyghurs. In other words, Han represents development and modernity, while non-Han populations are backwards and need help. This assumption is implicit in the above-mentioned ‘peaceful liberation’ phrase.

All the WPs dedicate long sections to comparing the backward economic structure in Xinjiang and the development brought about by the founding of ‘New China’ (*xin Zhongguo* 新中国). Quantitative data are used to sustain the argument. For instance, the 2003 WP provides detailed quantification of the increase in Xinjiang’s GDP, of the technological improvements in the agricultural sector, of the increase of industries and of industrial production, of infrastructure and telecommunication thanks to the support of China.³⁸ Grounded on a view of ‘science’ as the ‘authoritative knowledge’ and ‘ultimate arbiter of “truth” in modern society,³⁹ precise quantification and extensive use of numerical data demonstrate the objectivity and incontrovertibility of authorities’ arguments about Xinjiang improvements since 1949.

Although state-sponsored development projects and massive economic investment — such as the ‘Great Development of the West’ (*Xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发) — have fallen short of expectations, especially with regard to improving living standards for Uyghurs and non-Han nationalities in the region,⁴⁰ China’s authorities’ official narrative seemingly utilises ‘development’ as a shield to protect from international and domestic criticism on the Xinjiang issue. More recently, the ‘success’ in the fight against absolute poverty reported in 2020 as well as the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative which feature in Xinjiang have further fueled this reasoning. Interestingly enough, China’s official narrative uses the signifier: ‘human rights’ (*renquan* 人权) as

33 Xi Jinping, 决胜全面建成小康社会夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告 (Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era. Political report issued at the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party), *Xinhua*, 27 October 2017 (http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/27/c_1121867529.htm).

34 State’s Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 新疆的文化保护与发展 (Cultural protection and development in Xinjiang), 15 November 2018 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/37884/Document/1641510/1641510.htm>).

35 State’s Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Historical matters concerning Xinjiang’.

36 Xi Jinping, 习近平在文艺工作座谈会上的讲话 (Xi Jinping’s speech at the Forum on Literature and Arts), *Xinhua*, 24 October 2015 (http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/14/c_1116825558.htm).

37 James Leibold, ‘The Beijing Olympics and China’s Conflicted National Form’, *The China Journal*, No. 63, 2010, pp. 1–24.

38 State’s Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, ‘History and development of Xinjiang’.

39 Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

40 James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, London: C. Hurst Co., 2021, pp. 363–368.

a discursive tool in order to defend itself from the claim of human rights violations in Xinjiang. Indeed, the last of the WPs issued is entirely dedicated to clarifying the ‘rights’ enjoyed by the Chinese people and, in particular, by Xinjiang’s population. In the long introduction, it describes how the population in Xinjiang was oppressed by ‘imperialist forces, the feudal exploiting class and the privileged religious hierarchy’ and ‘deprived of basic human rights’, and notes the way in which, thanks to the CCP, they gained a ‘better protection of human rights’.⁴¹ By doing so, the WP also provides a definition of ‘human rights’ ‘with Chinese characteristics’ that differs from the one attached to Europe and the US, as it defines the ‘right to development’ (*fazhan quan* 发展权) as ‘the essential precondition for the realisation of all human rights’.⁴² In light of the above, it is not surprising that the officially-called ‘vocational education and training centres’ (*zhiye jineng jiaoyu peixun zhongxin* 职业技能教育培训中心), known abroad as ‘reeducation camps’ operate in order to uphold the protection of human rights: This is where Xinjiang’s non-Han population (mostly Uyghurs) have been interned since 2016. The PRC’s justification: ‘the protection of labor rights entails the safeguarding of human dignity, and therefore protects human rights’ (*baozhang laodong quan jiu shi weihu ren de zunyan, jiu shi baozhang renquan* 保障劳动权就是维护人的尊严，就是保障人权) .⁴³

It is worth noting that the concept of development that the official narrative refers to is not limited to economic growth or the amelioration of living standards but also includes the civilising project of non-Han nationalities. Indeed, one of the three WPs issued in 2019 revolves around the vocational education and training centres, and states that their aim is to ‘help the trainees to emancipate their minds, improve their quality (*suzhi* 素质) and their development prospects’.⁴⁴ The discourse on *suzhi* arose in the debate on the need to control the demographic growth of China in the late 1970s. The underlying

idea at the time was that by reducing the population, it might be possible to increase its inherent quality. This view led, for example, to the implementation of family planning policies for the whole Han population (non-Han were excluded at the beginning) starting in 1979.⁴⁵ Nowadays, while the strict limits imposed on Han population are gradually relaxing, the original 1979 birth-control policy has been coercively applied to the Uyghurs since 2017.⁴⁶ As it was four decades ago for the Han, the underlying view is still informed by the discourse on civilising China’s population and improving ‘people’s quality’. Therefore, the goal of developing Xinjiang is not limited to improving its economy in the various sectors and proving ‘job opportunities’. In fact, a great deal of emphasis is placed on transforming the population into an ideal community of ‘modern citizens’ that are compliant with the developmental vision promoted by the authorities.

2.3 The people’s war on terror

It has been already demonstrated that two discourses in the international sphere have played a key role in the development of China’s official narrative on Xinjiang: first, the one on the ‘three evils’ (*sangu shili* 三股势力) elaborated within the framework of the Shanghai Five, (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), and, second, the US-led global war on terror.⁴⁷

The Shanghai Five was formed in 1996 as a platform to resolve issues of border demarcation. However, it soon included in its agenda security issues, and, in 1998, elaborated the notion of the ‘three evils’ (terrorism, separatism and extremism). In 2001 Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five, which soon afterwards was rebranded Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). A few months before the attack on the Twin Towers (11 September 2001) took place, the SCO had adopted the moniker of ‘Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism,

41 State’s Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 新疆各民族平等权利的保障 (Respecting and protecting the rights of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang), 14 July 2021 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/42312/Document/1687708/1687708.htm>).

42 *Ibid.*

43 State’s Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 新疆的劳动就业保障 (Employment and labor rights in Xinjiang), 17 September 2020 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/42312/Document/1687708/1687708.htm>).

44 State’s Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 新疆的职业技能教育培训工作 (Vocational education and training in Xinjiang), 17 August 2019 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/39911/Document/1662044/1662044.htm>).

45 Susan Greenhalgh & Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China’s Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005; Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China*.

46 Nathan Ruser & James Leibold, ‘Family De-planning: The Coercive Campaign to Drive Down Indigenous Birth-rates in Xinjiang’, *The Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, No. 44, 2021.

47 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, pp. 69–75; Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*.

Separatism and Extremism'.⁴⁸ The concept of the 'three evils' unified 'separatism', 'terrorism' and 'extremism', paving the way for the identification by Beijing authorities of all perceived 'separatist' threats as 'terrorism'.⁴⁹

The Twin Towers attack represents a turning point in Beijing's discursive strategy. US President George W. Bush's announcement of a global 'war on terror' in 2001-2002 provided a further argument for China to justify state-led suppression of dissent voices as well as religious practices in Xinjiang. Chinese authorities reenacted violence that had occurred in the previous decades, most of which was the product of spontaneous outrage against abuses, rather than an execution of predetermined plans. According to the official narrative, these episodes of violence had been carried out by Uyghurs' terrorist organisations, namely the 'Eastern Turkistan Terrorist Forces' that were allegedly supported by the Taliban in Afghanistan.⁵⁰ Probably in an attempt to gain China's support for its own global war on terror, in August 2002, the US government supported Beijing's claims by designing the East Turkestan Islamic Movement as an international 'terrorist organisation' linked to Al Qaeda and, therefore, a threat for the US too. While Chinese authorities had pointed to various organisations belonging to the elusive 'Eastern Turkistan Terrorist Forces', the US blamed only one of them, i.e., East Turkestan Islamic Movement itself, as responsible for all the violence. This mistake by the US was later absorbed by China's official narrative. Thus, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement became the sole actor responsible for all the alleged Uyghur-perpetrated violence that occurred in the previous decades in China.⁵¹

Surfing the wave of Islamophobia worldwide,⁵² in 2014 China declared the beginning of the 'people's war on terror' (*fan kong renmin zhanzheng* 反恐人民战争). The same year, Beijing amended

the 1994 Regulations of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on Religious Affairs that, as Lavička demonstrates, 'attempt to uproot religion from society and everyday life'.⁵³ In 2015, Beijing passed a new 'Counterterrorism Law' that further codified and justified (in terms of 'rule by law' (*fazhi* 法治)) the assimilationist policies and anti-Islamic practice put into place in Xinjiang.⁵⁴

The repressive measures applied in Xinjiang were, therefore, no longer framed as merely combating the 'separatism' that threatened China, but as efforts to thwart 'counterterrorism' and fight 'religious extremism' in the entire world. 'Separatism' was initially deemed to be the 'hotbed' (*wenchuang* 温床) of the other two 'evils', to use official terminology,⁵⁵ but has been less emphasised since the declaration of the 'people's war on terror'. The lesser importance now attached to 'separatism' is apparent, by looking at the mission of the 'vocational education and training centre', which is fighting 'religious extremism' and 'terrorism', but does not include 'separatism'.⁵⁶ This specific view is based on a cause-effect link created in China's official narrative between the 'increase of religious extremism worldwide since the end of the Cold War' and the rise of 'religious terrorism in Xinjiang'.⁵⁷ In this way, the Chinese 'people's war on terrorism' evolved quite effortlessly into a 'global war on terror'.

2.4 The Party's leading role and a new approach to 'stability maintenance'

So far, the three main narratives shaping the Xinjiang issue have been outlined. In addition, two main trends featuring Chinese politics in recent years also deserve our attention for the deep impact they have had on the Xinjiang issue: first, the recentralisation of power in the hands of the CCP; second, the role played by a new approach to 'stability maintenance' in China's political discourse.

48 All the documents, including the Convention, delivered by SCO are available at: <http://eng.sectesco.org/documents/>

49 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, p. 68.

50 Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, pp. 330–32. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, pp. 69–75.

51 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, pp. 78–79.

52 David Brophy, 'Good and Bad Muslims in Xinjiang', *Made in China Journal*, Issue 4, No. 2, 9 July 2019, <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2019/07/09/good-and-bad-muslims-in-xinjiang/>.

53 Martin Lavička, 'Changes in Chinese Legal Narratives about Religious Affairs in Xinjiang', *Asian Ethnicity*, Issue 22, No. 1, 2021, p. 69.

54 Counterterrorism Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国反恐怖主义法). For comments on the Law, see Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, p. 178.

55 State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'The fight against terrorism and extremism and human rights protection in Xinjiang'.

56 State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'Vocational education and training in Xinjiang'.

57 State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 新疆的宗教信仰自由状况 (Freedom of religious belief in Xinjiang), 2 June 2016 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/34120/Document/1479257/1479257.htm>).

To start with the first, in recent years and even more so, since Xi Jinping took office, the CCP has placed under its direct control all spheres of contemporary Chinese society, from the cultural to the economic, and also the religious, to the detriment of the state's capacity to cope. The well-known wording of the political report issued at the 19th National Party Congress sums up this trend: 'Party, government, military, society and education, east, west, south, north, the Party leads everything' (*dang zheng jun min xue, dong xi nan bei Zhong, dang shi lingdao yiqie de* 党政军民学, 东西南北中, 党是领导一切的).⁵⁸ Specifically for religious affairs, this recentralisation of power under the CCP finds its concrete application in the restructuring of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, which, in 2018, absorbed the State Administration for Religious Affairs (a state organ under the State Council) causing the dissolution of this latter.⁵⁹ The re-establishment of CCP leadership over religious life signals a U-turn from the political practice implemented in post-Maoist China. Notwithstanding the adherence to Marxist, Leninist and Maoist's view, according to which there is no place for religion in China, the years following the end of the Cultural Revolution permitted a relative freedom of religious belief for Chinese citizens. The re-centralisation of control over religious practice under the CCP represents the materialisation of the view of religion as 'an obsolete aspect of Chinese culture, and thus it has to be controlled by the 'modern and atheistic' Party'.⁶⁰ By repressing religious beliefs and practices, the Party also weakens faith systems that might challenge its monopoly on ideology and its own promoted 'faith', i.e., top-down 'patriotism'.

In addressing the new approach to 'stability maintenance' adopted by the Party, scholars have emphasised that, in Xinjiang, 'the CCP had inverted its formerly declared relationship between development

and stability.'⁶¹ In other words, China's authorities no longer believe that economic development and prosperity are tools to achieve 'social stability'. This has led to the adoption of a new approach based on 'preventive' (*yufang* 预防) measures implemented in the region since the early 2000s. These measures are informed both by 'foreign models' (such as United States-led occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan) and Chinese intellectuals' theoretical contributions.⁶² A WP issued in 2019 defines 'preventive' measures as 'top priority (*yufang di yi wei* 预防第一位).⁶³ 'Prevention' finds application in the 'transformation through education' (*jiaoyu zhuanhua* 教育转化), a practice which was previously applied to the members of the Falun Gong, and that, in Xinjiang, led to the construction of the reeducation camps.⁶⁴

While it cannot be denied that this new approach to 'stability maintenance' finds its extreme consequence in Xinjiang, this perspective can be viewed as part of a broader governance strategy that has been developed even before Xi Jinping's office, though, under his leadership it has been further promoted. It has gained momentum in conjuncture with the slowing down of the Chinese economy. Against the backdrop of China's GDP lower growth rate, the CCP has been even harsher in repressing all those voices that may posit a threat to its rule, but has also silenced those voices that did not directly express dissent.⁶⁵ A new emphasis on ideology has gone hand in hand with new limitations on freedom of expression.⁶⁶ In light of this, the CCP applies a 'preventive' approach to the whole society, attempting to bar all forms of crisis that may threaten its leadership. This approach is developing alongside a growing emphasis on the need to safeguard China's 'security'.

A series of country-level reforms provides evidence of this new discursive emphasis. In 2013, a Central National Security Commission (*Zhongyang guojia*

58 Xi Jinping, 'Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era'.

59 Alex Joske, 'Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work', *China Brief Volume*, Issue 19, No. 9, 2019.

60 Martin Lavička, 'Changes in Chinese Legal Narratives about Religious Affairs in Xinjiang', Issue 22, No. 1, 2021, pp. 61–76 .

61 Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, 175.

62 Darren Byler, 'Preventative Policing as Community Detention in Northwest China', *Made in China Journal*, Issue 4, No. 3, 2019.

63 State's Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'The fight against terrorism and extremism and human rights protection in Xinjiang'.

64 Zenz, '«Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude»'.

65 Chloé Froissart, 'Changing patterns of Chinese civil society: Comparing the Hu-Wen and Xi Jinping eras', in Willy Wo-Lap Lam (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, London & New York: Routledge, 2018.

66 Jean-Philippe Béja, 'Reform, repression, co-optation: The CCP's policy toward intellectuals', in Willy Wo-Lap Lam (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, London & New York: Routledge, 2018.

anquan weiyuanhui 中央国家安全委员会) under the direct control of the general secretary of the Party was established; in 2015, a new National Security Law was issued, i.e. National Security Law (*guojia anquan fa* 国家安全法), and April 15 was chosen as National Security Education Day (*quanmin guojia anquan jiaoyu ri* 全民国家安全教育日). Interestingly, the 2015 legislation defines ‘prevention as the priority’ (*yufang wei zhu* 预防为主), a point which was not included in the previous versions of the law.⁶⁷ The definition of ‘national security’ is quite broad: “‘national security’ means a status in which the regime, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development, and other major interests of the state are relatively not faced with any danger and not threatened internally or externally and a status in which security is constantly maintained”.⁶⁸ The ‘preventive’ measures address all the events that harm or ‘could’ (*keneng* 可能) harm the country. The frequency of ‘security’ measures has increased and the concept of ‘country security’ (*guojia anquan* 国家安全) has grown in importance since 2014 and now figures prominently in all the WPs released since that year.

3. Conclusion

Over the past few years, the northwest region of the PRC and its main population have seen an escalation of state-perpetrated violence. This analysis has set out to understand further the ground on which the Chinese authorities justify their actions in the region. It has investigated the 11 white papers issued by the State’s Council Information Office since 2003, which specifically address the Xinjiang issue.

Results of the analysis demonstrate that China’s authorities structure their view on three main discursive layers. First, a new approach to interethnic unity lies at the centre of CCP’s manner of handling of the Xinjiang issue. The promotion of interethnic mingling has gone hand in hand with the promotion of a ‘Chinese identity’ – embedded in expressions like ‘Chinese nation’, ‘Chinese spirit’ punctuating contemporary Chinese political discourse – which is nothing but Han-ness. Second, Chinese state developmentalism – for which development overwhelms everything – contributes to discursively justifying the repressive measures portrayed as necessary to propel Xinjiang’s economic development and to improve the ‘quality’ of the non-Han population. Third, the SCO’s ‘three evils’ and the

US ‘war on terror’ have triggered the reframing of the Xinjiang issue, making it part of a ‘global war on terror’. Given the role of foreign discourses – such as the US discourse on fighting terrorism – it would be worth analysing how they interact with one another and the similarities and differences between China’s discourse on its war on terror and those of other countries, including the US.

In addition to these three main narratives carving out China’s official view on Xinjiang, the analysis has pointed out that state repression of religious belief complies with the Party’s recent emphasis on its guiding role in all the spheres of social life. This, in turn, materialises into a new approach to stability maintenance aimed at uprooting all the potential threats to Party’s grip on power. China’s new approach to ‘stability maintenance’ is mostly embedded in the concept of ‘national security’, interestingly, another non-negotiable ‘core interest’.

China’s ‘national core interests’ form the intersection where China’s domestic and foreign policies blur one into the other. When it comes to Xinjiang, this is even more so, as it is a borderland region, crucial for realising China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The state-perpetrated repression in the region and the country’s reaction to external criticism manifest the Party’s growing assertiveness in defending ‘core interests’ at home and abroad.

67 中华人民共和国国家安全法2015 (National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China 2015), Section 1, Article 9.

68 National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China (2015), Section 1, Article 2.

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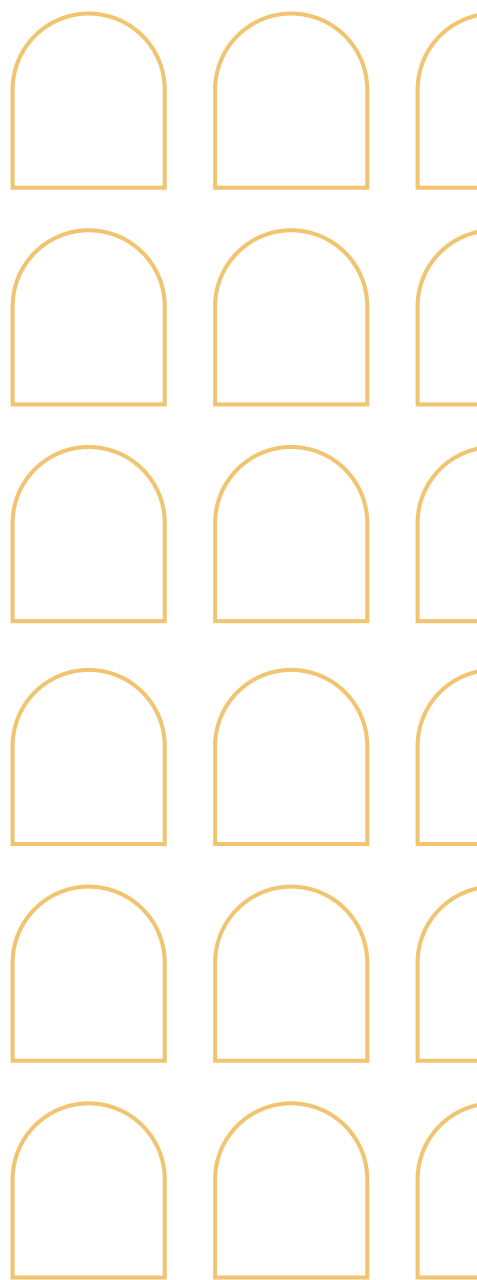
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