

## China's Strategic Denial of Muslim Internment in Xinjiang

Alongside China's numerous, tumultuous relationships with its ethnic minorities, the recent conflict with China's Muslim minority has stirred the attention of the international community. Over a million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Hui, and other Muslim minorities have been discovered interning at "re-education" camps in the Xinjiang Province of China since 2014. These facilities operated discretely and outside the legal system, masquerading as factories, prisons, and boarding schools. While this type of draconian behavior is banal to the regime of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the rise of the current president, Xi Jinping, the government's efforts to conceal and deny the existence of the camps have drawn the attention of people around the world.

Most recently, at a UN Human Rights Council, Xinjiang Vice-Governor Erkin Tuniyaz defended the Chinese government by declaring that the re-education camps were actually innocuous social programs to reduce unemployment in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, a major Chinese television station aired a state-sponsored documentary of "vocational training facilities" that filmed Uyghur students learning Chinese laws, Mandarin, and job-relevant skills such as sewing, baking, and machine-operating. In the report, a Xinjiang local gave a candid interview complimenting the facility's effectiveness at curbing Islamic terrorism and Uyghur separatism. Students filmed in the facility gave stone-faced testimonials claiming that they have abandoned their ethnic roots and pledged their loyalty to the Chinese government.

A recently published op-ed in the New York Times accused the Chinese government of attempting a culture genocide and compared the re-education camps to Soviet gulags and Nazi concentration camps. These varying versions of political propaganda serve to promote a political reality tailored to the interests of particular audiences around the world. They use authoritative voices to imbue social issues with demagogic and oversimplified solutions. Using this platform, the Chinese publications provide a deeply flawed, reductionistic, and alluring solution to terrorism and religious extremism. On the other hand, Western publications suffer from a different ailment. Audiences from around the world are approached with broad overgeneralizations that attempt to familiarize a Western audience with complex

realities of international communities. These portrayals create false equivalencies between domestic terrorism and foreign issues that require much more nuance.

After the Chinese Communist Revolution, the autonomous territory of Xinjiang retained limited forms of religious freedom. Uyghur children were allowed to attend religious private schools after secondary education and learn Uyghur rather than Mandarin.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, main sectors of the economy and government required the minority workers to understand and work in Mandarin even though the territory is *de jure* bilingual. As the economy of Xinjiang stagnated in the late nineties, civil unrest led to a series of violent independence movements.<sup>2</sup> A few days prior to the Beijing Olympics, a riot led to public stabbings in Ürümqi. Nearly two hundred Han, Hui, and Uyghur people died during the event. The central Chinese government attempted to stamp out the rebellion by establishing a police state, demolishing tens of mosques and historical sites of worship. Recently, after small independence demonstrations, the Chinese government banned the outward practice of Islamic religions in the region and began the constructions of re-education camps.

Under globalization and the transformation of communication networks, truth can often be conflated with virality. The Chinese government used the most recent UN Human Rights Forum as a platform to deliver its agenda to both its supporters and dissenters. Erkin Tuniyaz, a representative sent from the Beijing capital of Uyghur descent, addressed the UN's criticisms of human rights violations by denying the dissemination of crimes against Muslim minorities within Xinjiang. He blamed religious extremism for the lack of assimilation of the Uyghur minority into the Han majority and compared parts of the Islam religion to drug addiction.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, he repeated his introduction in the Uyghur language to

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<sup>1</sup> Wines, Michael "A Strongman Is China's Rock in Ethnic Strife". New York Times. Retrieved 2 January 2019. When Chen Quanguo replaced Wang Lequan as the party secretary for the Xinjiang region in 2016, he heavily constrained religious freedoms and made Mandarin education mandatory in primary schools. Previously, anti-religion laws were followed loosely and rarely enforced.

<sup>2</sup> Hopper, Ben; Webber, Michael (2009), "Migration, Modernisation and Ethnic Estrangement: Uyghur migration to Urumqi, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, PRC", *Inner Asia, Global Oriental Ltd.*, 11 (2): 173–203. Increased ethnic contact and labor competition coincided with Uyghur separatist terrorism from the 1990s, such as the 1997 Ürümqi bus bombings.

<sup>3</sup> "Xinjiang Camps Defended at UN Human Rights Forum." South China Morning Post, Reuters, 25 June 2019. This event was followed by a protest in Geneva and Human Rights activists denouncing Tuniyaz as a Uyghur.

members of the Human Rights Watch and other UN diplomats. This identity fallacy allows his audience to assume his authority over the Uyghur people, when the overwhelming evidence from satellite pictures and refugee migrants in Turkey suggest that Muslim minorities are forcefully interned by the central Chinese government. His critique of religious extremism is also an emotional appeal to Western nations. Especially following the wave of western nationalism, many UN nations would be less sympathetic to Muslim minorities labeled as Islamic extremists. Regardless of the UN's reaction, as an authoritarian government, admitting to a separation campaign would signal a defeat to western powers and a breach of national trust. The propagandic qualities of the defense are characteristic of diplomacy in authoritarian governments since it removes any need to analyze claims made by the government. Without analysis, any response is intuitively nationalistic, potentially riddled with fallacies lacking in legitimacy.

The documentary produced by China Central Television (CCTV), the predominant state-owned broadcaster, is another example of political propaganda produced to boost the public support of the camps in Xinjiang. Preexisting hostility and distrust of the Muslim minority from riots and preferential university admissions have led to widespread apathy from the Han ethnic majority. The fifteen-minute-long special aired in 2018 to show the success of the vocational camps in Hotan city of Xinjiang. Four years after the first reports on the camps came out, China has stopped denying the existence of the camps across Xinjiang. Contrarily, China decided to recast their re-education camps as schools to reform ethnic minorities who refuse to assimilate with the Han ethnic majority. In the segment, Uyghur and other Muslim minorities were shown in airconditioned factory rooms, learning Mandarin Chinese and chanting "I am a law-abiding citizen." During one interview, a female student was prompted to say, "If I didn't come here to study, I don't know what the consequences would be. I could have continued to follow religious extremists to a path of crime."<sup>4</sup> To many rural Chinese nationals, the conditions illustrated in these camps are far superior to the factory life on the mainland. It might even seem enviable compared to China's steel processing factories in Szechuan and Jilin. The public perception of ethnic minorities is

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<sup>4</sup> "筑牢根基, 源头治理." 央视网, CCTV, 16 Oct. 2018.

often complicated outside of Xinjiang. In the heavily state-regulated cities, the Uyghur and other ethnic minorities are often seen as ungrateful recipients of national largesse. Ethnic minorities are afforded more social welfare, leeway to have more than two children, and lower scores to get into college.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, oppression often plague minorities in ways that don't translate in public sectors. The state propaganda has resulted in public indifference towards the Uyghur crisis in Xinjiang.

The last piece of public discourse concerns an op-ed written by a historian for the New York Times. The short article titled “What Really Happens in China’s ‘Re-education’ Camps” explains the unfathomable reality that Chinese Muslim minorities live with while under the constant surveillance of the central Chinese government. Without going into much detail, it summated everything the Western audience needs to know to grasp the antagonistic nature of the Chinese government and its ruthless behavior towards its vulnerable minority. The Western caricature of Eastern foes lends itself to demagogic idealisms. Lacking the historical understanding of the enemy across the ocean, Western ethnocentrism of out-group and in-group associations are particularly dangerous in describing international issues. Western propaganda is often a reflection of domestic fears and internalizations. The op-ed describes large-scale mistreatment of an ethnic group while simultaneously reflecting on refugee migrants trapped in detentions along the Mexican American border. Discussion of the UN inevitably leads to pandering about economic sanctions. The separation of Uyghur families renders a conversation about the atrocities committed at home. These nods to domestic issues are symptomatic of the globalization and the interconnectivity of nations around the world.

These three pieces are connected because of the influence that propaganda has transnationally and globally. In the narrow viewfinder of Western media, crises across the world are trivialized using ethnocentric comprehensions about history and social relations; often creating moral dichotomies and oversimplifications. In the age where technology exhausts considerations towards out-group entities, it is

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<sup>5</sup> Palmer, James. “The Uighurs, China's Embattled Muslim Minority, Are Still Seeking an Identity.” The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 27 Sept. 2013. This was prior to the Ürümqi stabbings. Now, the Uyghur are afforded significantly less freedoms.

easy to feel a sense of moral catharsis towards foreign topics that are geographically isolated from the in-group. The internment of the Uyghur and other Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang China is one of the largest humanitarian issues of modern history. Many of these brutalities are able to surface despite the constant endeavor of the government to distort and disseminate the public's access to information. Effective public discourse demands its audiences to be knowledgeable about the information they consume and discern propagandic fallacies from news.

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