

# Being Chinese in Modern China: The Uyghur Cultural Genocide

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“If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.”<sup>1</sup>

Confucius, *The Analects*, Book 13, Verse 3, ca. 500 B.C.E

The population of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is 92 percent Han Chinese and the remaining 8 percent is made up of 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities. But do we know how many minorities there actually are in China? We don’t. In 1954 when the PRC conducted a census and asked about ethnicity, over 400 groups applied for classification proving that China is composed of many ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup> However, throughout its history, Chinese leaders have vacillated between operating as a multiethnic civilization that recognizes minorities and gives them autonomy, and a monoethnic authority that oppresses and assimilates them into the dominant Han majority. Being Chinese has largely been a political construct. In the 19th century, Chinese civilization was ravaged by imperialism, shaping a desire for self-determination and a unified state. As China transformed into a modern state, the government’s *modus operandi* was to treat ethnicities in the optimal way that served the state—prioritizing the state’s power and control above all else. Under Mao Zedong’s leadership in 1949, the government assumed an egalitarian approach to mobilize support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, economic crises ensued and prompted Mao to alter his approach; he clamped down on ideological differences and got rid of the “old” through the Cultural Revolution, which involved purging and ethnic violence. There was then a backlash to the repression and after Mao died and the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the government assumed a softer approach towards minorities as China focused on how to open up the economy and develop under Deng Xiaoping and subsequent leaders. Deng saw the value of purporting a multiethnic state while maintaining nationalist sentiment. Recently, Xi Jinping, who assumed power in 2013, has used ethnic nationalism as a tool to preserve and grow state power. The Chinese government, paradoxically, both embraces and suppresses ethnic nationalism to consolidate power. As it continues its evolution from a state to a nation-state that shares a common Han culture and is hypernationalistic, the government requires citizens to believe in the superiority of Han as an ethnicity and pledge full allegiance to the state first and foremost. The Chinese government’s promotion of ethnic nationalism via a unified Han Chinese identity has resulted in the mistreatment of ethnic minorities, such as the Uyghurs, exhibiting an extremely narrow definition of what it means to be Chinese; ironically, this hypernationalism is contributing to an undermining of China’s soft power in the global context and has the potential to subvert stability at home.

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<sup>1</sup> “Confucius, The Analects - 13,” USC US-China Institute, The Analects Attributed to Confucius [Kongfuzi], 551-479 BCE by Lao-Tse [Lao Zi], Translated by James Legge (1815-1897), last modified December 13, 1901, accessed December 5, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 3.

## Counterargument: Ethnic Nationalism Is Not to Blame

The Chinese government's treatment of the Uyghurs and other minority groups reflects complexity and contradictions. It could be argued that ethnic minorities have been discriminated against because of economic reasons, regional instability due to the breakup of the Soviet Union, and Islamophobia. On the economic front, China needs more resources for sustained economic growth and some minority areas such as Xinjiang (in Northwest China where the Uyghurs reside) are abundant in natural resources. Xinjiang has the country's largest oil and mineral reserves and is home to China's largest coal and natural gas reserves.<sup>3</sup> China's needs are hard to dispute and it is especially critical for the PRC to fuel continued economic development and solidify its power status, which are essential factors in maintaining the CCP's legitimacy as the single political party in China.<sup>4</sup> If China can maintain a virtuous cycle of economic growth, reinforcing the merits of the state, then the CCP can retain power. In order to achieve economic growth, the CCP must control rich lands and generate more jobs and capital and Xinjiang is a productive area for this economic expansion.<sup>5</sup> As China became the 'factory of the world,' oil, natural gas, and eventually cotton and tomatoes became key components of the Xinjiang economy.<sup>6</sup> Factories have been taking advantage of cheap labor and subsidies enabled by Xinjiang's reeducation camps.<sup>7</sup> In 2005, an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to China could bring oil to the country reliably, but the government had to ensure Xinjiang was secure.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure project to connect Asia with Europe and Africa launched in 2013 by China, traverses Xinjiang.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, China's treatment of the Uyghurs is driven by economic factors and China wanting to maintain its stature on the global stage as one of the most powerful nations in not just Asia—but the world. China is also in need of labor and it could be concluded that the Chinese government wants to help the Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities advance by teaching them Mandarin and "re-educating" them and also "relocating" them to places where they can earn higher wages and boost the economy. The break-up of the Soviet Union could also be a cause of minority mistreatment because it created nationalism among various minority groups, including the Uyghurs, and the CCP needed to aggressively squash any uprisings to keep the nation-state intact. The break-up of the Soviet Union created regional instability because some independent nations formed and some ethnicities reframed their sense of belonging. Xinjiang is geographically important to China because it is located in the Northwest area bordering eight countries such as former Soviet republics, India, and Pakistan, among others. Finally, it could be argued that the primary cause of the mistreatment of minorities and the Uyghurs is not hypernationalism, but instead rooted in Islamophobia and

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory W. Caskey and Ilia Murtazashvili, "The Predatory State and Coercive Assimilation: The Case of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang," SSRN Electronic Journal, January, 2021, 10.2139/ssrn.3878514; Lindsay Maizland, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," Council on Foreign Relations, September 22, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights>.

<sup>4</sup> Donald H. McMillen, "China, Xinjiang and Central Asia—'Glocality' in the Year 2008." In *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia*, eds. Colin Mackerras and Michael Clarke (Abingdon: Routledge), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Sean R. Roberts, "Settler Colonialism in the Name of Counterterrorism: Of 'Savages' and 'Terrorists.'" In *The Xinjiang Emergency*, ed. Michael Clarke (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 91.

<sup>6</sup> Darren Byler. *In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Darren Byler, "How Companies Profit From Forced Labor in Xinjiang," The China Project, September 4, 2019. <https://thechinaproject.com/2019/09/04/how-companies-profit-from-forced-labor-in-xinjiang/>.

<sup>8</sup> Morris Rossabi, *China and the Uyghurs* (London: Rowman & Littlefield), 116.

<sup>9</sup> Rossabi, *China and the Uyghurs*, 119.

post-9/11 anti-Muslim sentiment, catalyzing counterterrorism. Terrorism has undoubtedly been a global threat since 9/11, with extremism and violence occurring throughout the world and fueled by religious tension at times. Islamophobia is pervasive and this manifests in everyday life such as when an 8-year-old Chinese girl asked Abduweli Ayup, an Uyghur activist and poet, whether they were Osama Bin Laden.<sup>10</sup>

However, these are not the primary drivers of hypernationalism. China has a dream of revitalization and in order to fully achieve it, the government believes that economic growth is not sufficient and the country needs a unified identity. The Chinese government is not the only government pursuing such a goal—the end of the Cold War triggered a surge of nationalism that aroused conflicts in many parts of the world and is manifesting in the reconstruction of identity on the basis of nationality.<sup>11</sup> In the Chinese government's quest to build a unified state, ethnic minorities need to be marginalized so that the Han majority can control China. As a result, the government seeks to “destroy [non-Han] language and culture” and to “brainwash the people.”<sup>12</sup>

## Han Origins

What does it mean to be Han? Today, the Han Chinese are the dominant ethnic group both culturally and politically.<sup>13</sup> The Han Chinese is a “colossal category of identity that encompasses 94 percent of the population of mainland China, making it the largest ethnic group on earth.”<sup>14</sup> This is because the Han has been absorbing other ethnicities throughout China's history. The development of the Han nationality has been compared to a snowball because it gets bigger the farther it rolls.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, government officials in China are predominantly Han—it is exceedingly rare to see a person that represents a minority in a position of power (particularly in Beijing). There is a *clear* lack of representation for minorities.

However, the Han didn't always account for the vast majority of the population in Xinjiang. The Chinese government encouraged the Han to settle in Xinjiang. In 1949, the Han Chinese made up just 6.7 percent of the region's population, and that number increased to 41.6 percent in 1978.<sup>16</sup> The Han Chinese grew to prominence in the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century; however, it was at the expense of China's minorities, especially the Uyghurs.

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<sup>10</sup> Abdelfatah Rund and Ramtin Arablouei, “Who the Uyghurs Are and Why China is Targeting Them,” NPR, May 31, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/31/1001936433/who-the-uyghurs-are-and-why-china-is-targeting-them>.

<sup>11</sup> Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Charlie Campbell, “How Beijing Is Redefining What It Means to Be Chinese, from Xinjiang to Inner Mongolia,” *Time*, July 12, 2021, <https://time.com/6078961/china-ccp-anniversary-identity/>.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Wiggins, “Survival of Uyghur Ethnic Identity: A Case of Self Preservation,” Marshall Johnson, Ph.D. Department of Social Inquiry, Accessed November 3, 2022: 36.

<https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/75936/Survival%20of%20Uyghur%20Ethnic%20Identity%20A%20Case%20of%20Self%20Preservation%20by%20Jacky%20Wiggins.pdf?sequence=10&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas S. Mullaney, “Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Identity in the Study of Modern China,” In *A Companion to Chinese History*, ed. Michael Szonyi, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 298.

<sup>15</sup> Xi Jieshun, “Understanding the Snowball Theory of the Han Nationality,” In *Critical Han Studies*, eds. Thomas S. Mullaney, James Leibold, Stéphane Gros, and Eric Vanden Bussche (Manchester: University of California Press), 113.

<sup>16</sup> Lorraine Boissoneault, “Is China Committing Genocide Against the Uyghurs?,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/is-china-committing-genocide-against-the-uyghurs-180979490/>.

Despite its rise, “Han is beset by a host of linguistic, cultural, political, and historical inconsistencies that call into question its status as a coherent community.”<sup>17</sup> However, the Han’s nationality movement from plurality to unity has been successful and shows signs that it will persist in the future of the Chinese nation.<sup>18</sup>

## Uyghur Origins and Oppression

Muslims make up approximately 1.8 percent of China’s population, which is roughly 22 million people. The Uyghurs, a Muslim Turkic people, number about eleven million, making up approximately half of the population in Xinjiang.<sup>19</sup> The majority of Uyghurs reside in Xinjiang. Uyghurs are Central Asian people that differ from the Han Chinese in their religion, language, and culture. The Uyghurs are descended from the traditional regional nomads, merchants, and Arab traders that traversed the Silk Road. This combination of cultures led to a uniquely independent culture that is distinctly different from Han Chinese society.<sup>20</sup> Culturally, linguistically, and historically, the Uyghurs share much more with the peoples of former Soviet Central Asia than they do with the Han ethnic group of China.<sup>21</sup> Due to this, many Uyghurs feel as if Xinjiang should be recognized as its own independent state instead of being governed by the Chinese government in Beijing. This has led to much tension between the Uyghurs and the PRC. According to the UN, Indigenous Peoples are those inhabiting a region prior to the conquest or settlement of that land by those of different ethnic or cultural origins who come to dominate. Given this definition, Uyghurs today should be considered the Indigenous People of the region they inhabit. However, the PRC is adamant that Uyghurs are not indigenous to their homeland and that their region has always been part of China, an assertion that creates conflict between the Uyghurs and the Chinese state.”<sup>22</sup>

To further complicate matters, the Chinese government wants their population to see themselves as citizens of the state first, while the Uyghurs see their identity as Uyghurs first. The Uyghurs believe they are part of a distinct nation with its own homeland, history, culture, and language.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the state does not come first for Uyghurs—Islam does. The CCP is colonizing their *own people*—the CCP strategy in Xinjiang is akin to a process of ‘internal colonization’ whereby the non-Han peoples are placed in a position of considerable ‘marginalization.’<sup>24</sup> The Uyghurs feel they have a right to be part of a modern state based on principles of representative government, equality, rule of law, and just administration, either in the form of an independent nation-state or an autonomous province. In effect, they seek the ‘political emancipation’ of their nation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mullaney, “Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Identity in the Study of Modern China,” 298.

<sup>18</sup> Jieshun, “Understanding the Snowball Theory of the Han Nationality,” 113.

<sup>19</sup> Maizland, “China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.”

<sup>20</sup> Wiggins, “Survival of Uyghur Ethnic Identity: A Case of Self Preservation.”

<sup>21</sup> Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Gardner Bovington, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2.

<sup>24</sup> McMillen, “China, Xinjiang and Central Asia—’Glocality’ in the Year 2008.”

<sup>25</sup> Ondrej Klimes, *Struggle by the Pen* (Leiden: Brill), 259.

As Xinjiang means 'new frontier' in Mandarin, many Uyghur rights advocates point out that it actually counters China's claims of ancient unbroken domination.<sup>26</sup> China asserts that Xinjiang has been part of China for 2,000 years without interruption, but historiography shows the almost constant flow of people and culture into and out of Xinjiang, and demonstrates the eighteenth-century origins of the current Chinese control in Xinjiang when the Qing Dynasty acquired Xinjiang.<sup>27</sup>

Xi Jinping and his authoritarian government have committed numerous atrocities against the Uyghurs and it's estimated that more than 1 million Uyghur people have been detained in camps where they have been subjected to torture, forced labor, religious restrictions, and even forced sterilization.<sup>28</sup> The Uyghurs have been subject to undeniable human rights violations solely based on their ethnicity, religion, and the government's perception of them. Countries worldwide and other organizations have formally condemned human rights abuses; however, China doesn't seem to be altering its course. The Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China released a statement in September 2020 condemning China's blatant disregard for the rights of the Uyghurs, saying that the Uyghurs are "enduring intolerable, state-sponsored persecution" and claiming that there is credible evidence pointing to "mass incarceration, indoctrination, extrajudicial detention, invasive surveillance, forced labor, and the destruction of Uyghur cultural sites, including cemeteries, together with other forms of abuse."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the United States and several other foreign governments have characterized China's actions in Xinjiang as genocide, while the UN human rights office has stopped short of assigning the genocide label but has said that the violations could constitute crimes against humanity.<sup>30</sup> For the UN to assign the genocide label, there has to be an intent to commit genocide and exterminate a group, and while there is evidence of cultural genocide, the UN has not taken the next step of calling the situation a full-scale genocide.<sup>31</sup>

But why are the Uyghurs being treated harshly? Why are the Uyghurs' rights being disregarded by Xi? In order to find an answer to these questions, we need to go back to the very beginning of the history of the treatment of ethnicities (including the Uyghurs) in China and the evolution of the Chinese nation-state. The Chinese government's treatment of Uyghurs can be attributed to their changing interpretation of what it means to be Chinese in order to strengthen the Chinese nation-state and their control of the population.

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<sup>26</sup> Minority Rights Group International, "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - China: Uyghurs."

<sup>27</sup> James A. Millward, "Positioning Xinjiang in Eurasian and Chinese History: Differing Visions of the 'Silk Road,'" In *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia*, eds. Colin Mackerras and Michael Clarke (Abingdon: Routledge), 71.

<sup>28</sup> Arablouei and Rund, "Who the Uyghurs Are and Why China is Targeting Them."

<sup>29</sup> "IPAC Statement on the Treatment of Ethnoreligious Minorities in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, June 29, 2020, <https://ipac.global/campaign-treatment-of-predominantly-muslim-minorities-in-xinjiang/>.

<sup>30</sup> Maizland, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang."

<sup>31</sup> John B. Bellinger III, "China's Abuse of the Uighurs: Does the Genocide Label Fit?" Council on Foreign Relations, February 3, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/article/chinas-abuse-uighurs-does-genocide-label-fit>.

## **Historical Background**

### **Qing Dynasty**

Historically, China was a collection of many different lands with a diverse set of people. Uyghurs, Mongolians, Tibetans, and Han Chinese were a few of the groups that made up the population of China. The Qing Dynasty period, which lasted from 1644 through 1911, marked a period of unprecedented population growth and territorial expansion.<sup>32</sup> The Qing doubled the amount of territory under the control of the emperor of Beijing, and in order to conquer successfully, the Qing rulers had to allow for ethnic autonomy.

During the eighteenth century, Muslim populations living in Northwest China clashed with the Qing rulers and revolted on numerous occasions as the state attempted to exert more control over lands where Muslims lived. Many revolts were staged in opposition to the influx of migrants, who were coming from the overpopulated regions of China to regions that had not previously been under direct Chinese control. These revolts were violently suppressed by the state, ending a long period of accommodation for Muslims in China.<sup>33</sup> For a quick period after 1864, the region broke away from the Qing Dynasty while China was preoccupied with other conflicts with foreign enemies. However, the Chinese government regained control in 1877, and in doing so, restored Chinese control over the entirety of the nation.<sup>34</sup> In 1884, this region was formally renamed Xinjiang.<sup>35</sup> Eventually, in 1912, the Qing Dynasty collapsed after almost 300 years of being in power.

The Uyghurs lived in the region since the Great Migration, which began in the 6th century. By the 11th century, Islam had become the predominant religion in the region as opposed to Buddhism, which was the primary religion in other areas.<sup>36</sup> In the 16th century, Uyghurs in positions of leadership established a set of Islamic city-states, which became known as East Turkestan. When the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1911, several Uyghur leaders led successful attempts to create independent Muslim republics in western China.<sup>37</sup>

### **Sun Yat-sen**

After the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1911, the founders of the new Republic of China (1911-1949) struggled to reconcile Han ethnic nationalism with China's multiethnic imperial heritage.<sup>38</sup> They realized the contradiction between ethnic Han nationalism and the desire to retain all of the Qing territories, which included ethnic minorities in the frontier areas.<sup>39</sup> There

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<sup>32</sup> Kelly Anne Hammond, "The History of China's Muslims and What's Behind their Persecution," The Conversation, May 24, 2019.

<https://theconversation.com/amp/the-history-of-chinas-muslims-and-whats-behind-their-persecution-117365>.

<sup>33</sup> Hammond, "The History of China's Muslims and What's Behind their Persecution."

<sup>34</sup> Minority Rights Group International, "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - China : Uyghurs."

<sup>35</sup> Boissoneault, "Is China Committing Genocide Against the Uyghurs?"

<sup>36</sup> Michael Dillon, "A Uighurs' History of China," *History Today*, January 1, 2020, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/behind-times/uighurs%E2%80%99-history-china>.

<sup>37</sup> Boissoneault, "Is China Committing Genocide Against the Uyghurs?"

<sup>38</sup> Mullaney, "Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Identity in the Study of Modern China."

<sup>39</sup> Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*, 22.

was a disconnect between the notion of a uniform state entirely composed of Han Chinese versus a diverse nation where numerous ethnic minorities could thrive.

The founder of the new Chinese Republic was Sun Yat-sen, who served as the first president of this new regime. Sun Yat-sen posed two conflicting ideals. To start, he was one of the first people to imagine China as a multiethnic nation. He believed that it was vital for ethnic minorities such as Tibetans and Mongolians to be integrated and assimilated into the larger majority of Han people. This is because Sun Yat-sen thought that regardless of what minority one was part of, they were all still part of a single line of ancestry that had gone askew throughout history. It was not until Sun Yat-sen that “Han nationalism” became synonymous with the Chinese state.<sup>40</sup> He believed that the only way for China to reach its full potential as a global superpower was for it to embrace a sense of Han nationalism. Sun Yat-sen believed that this would help unite and mobilize China against foreign enemies and help them rise to prominence on the global stage.

However the reality was that Sun needed the support of the ethnic minorities at the borders and for practical matters, he had to promote a multiethnic nation-state to retain control. Han Chinese leaders in the Republican period already had an agenda of assimilation—they stripped Ural-Altaic names from the Xinjiang map and replaced them with Old Han names.<sup>41</sup> Later, after the creation of the PRC, the Communist Party would adopt Sun Yat-sen’s vision of Han dominance and his policies toward ethnic minorities.<sup>42</sup> The heirs to Sun’s nationalist vision for China were the leaders of the CCP. Inspired by Sun Yat-sen’s set of beliefs, the CCP has made a perpetual effort to create a unified nation-state dominated by the Han people.<sup>43</sup>

As a result of Han nationalism, the Uyghurs were relegated to the “margins of society.” The Uyghurs faced increasing amounts of discrimination, as the government incessantly tried to strip their culture away from them. The founding of the Eastern Turkestan Republic (ETR) in 1933 reflected the heightening of the Uyghur national identity and the resistance to the repression of the Han.<sup>44</sup> The oppression the Uyghurs faced can be attributed to Sun Yat-sen’s influence on the policy of the Chinese government, despite his initial vision of a multiethnic state.

### **Chiang Kai-shek and KMT vs CCP**

In addition to dealing with the Japanese invasion between 1927 and 1949, China was engaged in a long and bloody Civil War. On one side was the Kuomintang (Nationalist) Party of the Republic of China (KMT), and on the other side was the CCP. Following the death of Sun Yat-sen, a new leader of the KMT emerged: Chiang Kai-shek. He continued to push for the same types of policies that Sun Yat-sen had advocated for—Chiang envisioned a Republic that was built on the ideals of Han Nationalism. The CCP, on the other hand, was spearheaded by Mao Zedong and was focused on equality. Mao’s ultimate objective was to overthrow the KMT through a Civil War and to establish his own regime. After many years of fighting, Mao was successful—in 1949, Chiang fled to Taiwan and Mao was declared the leader of China.

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<sup>40</sup> Wiggins, “Survival of Uyghur Ethnic Identity: A Case of Self Preservation,” 41.

<sup>41</sup> Millward, “Positioning Xinjiang in Eurasian and Chinese History: Differing Visions of the ‘Silk Road,’” 58.

<sup>42</sup> Wiggins, “Survival of Uyghur Ethnic Identity: A Case of Self Preservation,” 41.

<sup>43</sup> Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 159.

<sup>44</sup> Morris Rossabi, *China and the Uyghurs* (London: Rowman & Littlefield), 20.

To garner support from ethnic minorities, the CCP promised the right of self-determination and the freedom of choice to join the Chinese federation or to secede from it and form independent states.<sup>45</sup> The Uyghurs likely believed in Mao's assurances that minority cultures and languages would be protected and preserved under Communism.<sup>46</sup> As a result, they supported the CCP.

### **CCP, Mao, and Socialism**

When Mao became the leader of China, he immediately pushed for and advocated for communist and socialist ideals. Socialism promotes equality, the redistribution of wealth and for economic and social disparities to be eliminated. Therefore, during the brief period when Mao first came into power, there was an effort to include ethnic minorities and to treat them as equals to Han people to mobilize support for Mao's political regime. The early Chinese communists resisted Chiang Kai-shek's monoethnic construction, and instead rallied around a vision of China as an amalgamation of politically and economically equal ethno-national groups, basing their view on the Soviet Union model.<sup>47</sup> In other words, Mao's policies directly contradicted Chiang's beliefs of Han Nationalism and instead promoted equity for ethnic minorities in the PRC: the policies and regulations of the Communist Party toward minorities were based on the idea that everyone was equal regardless of their ethnicity or race. Minorities should be allowed to express their culture without fear of government intervention as long as the minorities were striving toward the national goal of a united China. Autonomous regions were created to protect the minorities and give them control over local and cultural areas.<sup>48</sup> However, the pretense of equality hid ulterior motives. The Communists believed that race and discrimination is a byproduct of class struggle.<sup>49</sup> Thus, by promoting equality, they were essentially claiming that communism had succeeded. The PRC also may have wanted to make an effort to recognize the diverse ethnic minorities in order to not look like an "evil colonialist."<sup>50</sup> This could help China with regard to foreign powers being more moderate in their affairs with China in the economic and political arenas. In fact, Mao delivered a speech stating that "the Han nationality has the population, the minority nationalities have the land[...]. It is thus imperative that the Han assist the minorities in raising their standard of living and socialist ideological consciousness, while the minorities provide the natural resources necessary for the industrialization and development of the motherland."<sup>51</sup> Mao emphasized that the minorities resources were "rich," shedding light on the importance of minorities in China and their contributions to the nation.

However, the CCP made a complete U-turn and began to suppress ethnic nationalism and promote the notion of a unitary, multiethnic nation-state as it realized the strategic importance of

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<sup>45</sup> Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Rossabi, *China and the Uyghurs*, 36.

<sup>47</sup> Mullaney, "Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Identity in the Study of Modern China," 292.

<sup>48</sup> Wiggins, "Survival of Uyghur Ethnic Identity: A Case of Self Preservation," 36.

<sup>49</sup> Wiggins, "Survival of Uyghur Ethnic Identity: A Case of Self Preservation," 42.

<sup>50</sup> James A. Millward, "What Xi Jinping Hasn't Learned From China's Emperors," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/opinion/xi-jinping-china.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Matthew D. Moneyhon, "China's Great Western Development Project in Xinjiang: Economic Palliative, or Political Trojan Horse," *Denv. J. Int'l L. & Pol'y* 31, Number 3 (Summer 2003): 491, <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1365&context=djilp>.



ethnic minority areas, which amounted to about 64 percent of China's territory.<sup>52</sup> Again, the focus shifted to retaining CCP power by strengthening the state. The CCP assumed a multiethnic approach to defeat the KMT and now they needed a more unified approach to take more absolute control.

Behind the scenes, the PRC government promoted Han nationalism that started in Beijing and spread like a wildfire to regions like Xinjiang. To physically control and extend political jurisdiction over all frontier areas, the CCP moved quickly to integrate ethnic minority communities into the structure of the communist state by adopting a variety of measures. This included the large-scale migration of Han people to ethnic minority areas, the recruitment of ethnic minorities into the party and government bureaucracies, and the encouragement of minorities to learn the Han language and other cultural practices.<sup>53</sup>

In the 1940s, there was a brief independence for the Uyghurs. The independent government was the second Eastern Turkestan Republic (ETR) and lasted from 1944-1949. However, the ETR was consumed by the CCP and Xinjiang came under their control. Eight of the ETR leaders were killed in a plane crash on the way to negotiate their relationship between Beijing and the CCP in early 1950, and on October 1, 1955, Xinjiang became the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The CCP established a unit called the *bingtuan* to establish and maintain CCP control in the region.<sup>54</sup>

## **Cultural Revolution**

The treatment of minorities and Mao's perception of diversity was completely transformed and turned on its head during the Cultural Revolution in China between 1966 and 1976. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's objectives shifted. Mao blamed China's economic troubles on the connection to its past. He wanted to get rid of the "The Four Olds" of ideas, culture, customs, and habits. Instead of a focus on "celebrating China's ethnic diversity," the primary goal was one of "assimilation."<sup>55</sup> The PRC started to value diversity less and less, and instead intended to create a uniform state that solely embraced Han ideals. Assimilation also entailed the destruction and disapproval of belief systems that were not directly in line with the "Han way of life." Mao's followers and an array of extremists attacked many aspects of non-Han minority communities and cultures, from language and architecture to religion and social practices.<sup>56</sup> In particular, there was intense discrimination directed against Muslims. This further negatively impacted Uyghurs living in China, and conditions did not improve, except for a short time in the 1970s and 1980s.

## **A Brief Period of Relative Stability in the 1970s/1980s**

Mao's death in 1976 changed everything. The Communist Party, which was led by the new leader of China, Deng Xiaoping, adopted new policies that were more tolerant towards minorities—especially Muslims. Deng wanted to restore stability at home after the repressive

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<sup>52</sup> Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Rossabi, *China and the Uyghurs*, 36.

<sup>55</sup> Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation*, 125.

<sup>56</sup> Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation*, 125.

assimilation and damage of the Cultural Revolution. Deng's primary focus was on opening up China's economy and stimulating growth as well as promoting unity. Deng advocated for policies that re-introduced "multiculturalism" and "ethnic diversity." The latter part of the 1970s, as well as the 1980s, serve as an example of a time period where multiculturalism and ethnic diversity lived alongside Han Nationalism. There were some riots and resistance due to Han migration, but in general it was a time when minorities, such as Uyghurs, were not under as harsh a rule. Uyghurs embraced their own form of ethnic nationalism. As a result, by the late 1980s, tensions mounted and the *bingtuan* was implemented again prompting additional social and economic disparities between the Han and Uyghurs.

### **Collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991**

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 primarily impacted countries that were part of the USSR, this political change had an indelible effect on China's policies and on minorities within the PRC's borders. As a result of the disintegration of the USSR, nationalism spread, the effects of discrimination against minorities were amplified, and economic challenges surfaced. Following the collapse, Turkic people in Central Asia formed independent states in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>57</sup> As China emerged from the Cultural Revolution, the CCP worked to consolidate power while nationalism brewed within minority groups including the Uyghurs. There was an upsurge of resistance. Because of this resistance, government officials in Beijing viewed it as a threat to their regime and the power of the CCP. The government cracked down on Xinjiang and the Uyghurs—minorities in Xinjiang were oppressed through cruel and extreme methods.

### **The 1990s and Strike Hard Campaign**

National unity was threatened by several minority independence movements, notably the Uyghurs and the Tibetans."<sup>58</sup> Han nationalism came into play with regard to Beijing's fear of these independence movements. In 1992, Uyghur radicals detonated several bombs in Xinjiang. Following these and other events, the "Strike Hard Campaign" was launched to reinforce the CCP's authoritarian ideals and eliminate dissidents. Anyone who was believed to support the Uyghurs' cause in any way was subject to imprisonment without a trial.<sup>59</sup> The Strike Hard campaign brought violence and frequent conflict between Han Chinese and Uyghurs, particularly in the Southern part of Xinjiang. The Strike Hard Campaign didn't solely have an internal effect on China, however. Many foreign nations saw the Strike Hard Campaign and suspected China of human rights abuses. This certainly shaped foreign policy towards China in the following years. The Strike Hard Campaign exemplifies the idea that, in certain instances, the Chinese government was not afraid to use repressive tactics to obtain what they desire—a unified China.

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<sup>57</sup> Boissoneault, "Is China Committing Genocide Against the Uyghurs?"

<sup>58</sup> Colin Mackerras, "China's Minorities and National Integration," In *Nationalism, Democracy and National Integration in China*, eds. Leong H. Liew and Shaoguang Wang (London: Routledge Curzon), 147.

<sup>59</sup> Rossabi, *China and the Uyghurs*, 86.

## 9/11, Global War on Terror, and 2009 Uyghur Episode

The tensions between the Uyghurs (as well as other ethnic minorities) and Han Chinese only escalated. After September 11, 2001, the Uyghurs were persecuted because of both Han nationalism as well as an increased amount of Islamophobia. On September 20, 2001, President Bush stated that “this is not, however, just America’s fight...this is the world’s fight...we ask every nation to join us” in defeating Islamic terrorism. He went on to warn that any nation that harbors or supports terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime. Bush effectively set in motion the Global War on Terror.<sup>60</sup> Although he warned against counter-terrorism, that is precisely what ensued in China and especially with regard to the Uyghurs despite there being limited evidence that more than a few hundred Uyghurs, if that many, had any connection with Al Qaeda or the Taliban.<sup>61</sup> Tensions reached a peak in 2009. Although most of the disputes between the Han and the Uyghurs had taken place in the South of Xinjiang, in July 2009, Uyghur protests in the regional capital, Urumqi, broke out. Protesters were angry because of the state-incentivized Han Chinese migration into the region and widespread economic and cultural discrimination. Nearly two hundred people were killed. Thousands of Uyghurs were detained, and some of them were executed. In the eyes of Beijing, all Uyghurs could potentially be terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. During the next few years, authorities blamed Uyghurs for attacks at a local government office, a train station, an open-air market, as well as Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The 2009 event was a turning point in the Communist Party’s attitude and behavior toward the Uyghurs.<sup>62</sup> Since the ethnic riots in 2009, the Chinese government slowly, albeit purposefully, increased restrictions on Uyghurs and worked to limit their freedom of cultural expression. Job discrimination, land seizures, and government control of religious practice led to protests and violent crackdowns throughout the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>63</sup> Ironically, in September 2009, in the PRC State Council White Paper, the government describes the ethnic policy as featuring “equality, unity, regional ethnic autonomy, and common prosperity for all ethnic groups,” and goes on to say that the ethnic policy is “in line with China’s actual situation” and has “fostered the unity and harmonious coexistence of all ethnic groups who are striving with one mind for economic development, political stability, cultural prosperity and social harmony.”<sup>64</sup> Beijing’s positioning reflected a complete disconnect with reality and manipulation of public opinion.

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<sup>60</sup> Wright, Robin and Edwin Chen, “Bush Says China Backs War on Terror.” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 2001, <https://www.latimes.com/la-101901bush-story.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Maizland, “China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.”

<sup>63</sup> Byler, *In the Camps: China’s High-Tech Penal Colony*, 16.

<sup>64</sup> “PRC State Council White Paper, China’s Ethnic Policy and Common Prosperity And Development Of All Ethnic Groups, Sept. 27, 2009,” Published by the People’s Republic of China State Council Information Office, September 27, 2009, <https://china.usc.edu/prc-state-council-white-paper-chinas-ethnic-policy-and-common-prosperity-and-development-all-ethnic>.

## 2013-2014 Episode

The violence and tensions between the Uyghurs and Han persisted into the 2010s. In particular, the number of violent crimes directed at Han civilians that were carried out by Uyghurs escalated tension to an even higher degree. During this time period, some violent incidents began to resemble what might be internationally regarded as terrorism.<sup>65</sup> The Chinese government used this as a justification for its poor treatment of the Uyghurs. The government declared a “People’s War on Terror,” which gave way to a mass internment program directed toward the entire Muslim population in the Xinjiang province—a total of 15 million people were targeted.<sup>66</sup>

## 2017 Crackdown and Beyond

In 2017, the Chinese government began to intensify its campaign against the Uyghurs, and began to stress a process of “forced assimilation.” The process of stripping the Uyghurs of any facets of their culture started in schools: the government revealed a new school curriculum that eliminated the use of the Uyghur language, and instead replaced it with strictly Chinese. Additionally, the Chinese government built several buildings that they claimed to be “vocational training centers,” but, in reality, a more fitting label would be prison camps.<sup>67</sup> Another method of cracking down that the government exercised was forced labor. Between 2017 and 2020, eighty thousand previously detained Uyghurs were sent to factories throughout China. Forced labor is an important element of the government’s plan for Xinjiang’s economic development, which includes making it a hub of textile and apparel manufacturing. Chinese officials have described the policy as ‘poverty alleviation.’<sup>68</sup> Because 80 percent of China’s cotton production is based in Xinjiang, the province has been transformed into a large center for textile production.<sup>69</sup> As a result, this has created an insatiable demand for labor in Xinjiang, and the Chinese government has not been reluctant to force the Uyghurs to fulfill these demands. The system is enforced by a complex web of technological surveillance that includes teachers, guards, “relatives,” and police that monitor the populace.<sup>70</sup> This exemplifies that the treatment of Uyghurs has been extremely inhumane and different from how other citizens in China are treated.

## Xi Jinping and Zhonghua

In its first decades, the PRC tacitly acknowledged its past and embraced its identity as a multinational state. But under President Xi Jinping, the CCP is actively working to erase the cultural and political diversity of the past. This exhibits the modern Chinese government’s commitment to decimate culture, religion, or beliefs that are different from the traditional “Han way of life.” Essentially, the Chinese government believes that the only way to preserve power and create a strong state is to create a unified state—and anyone who actively opposes the majority must adapt or be punished for their actions. Xi aspires to “forge the communal consciousness of the Chinese nation” through assimilation as he asserted during the 19th

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<sup>65</sup> Byler, *In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Byler, *In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony*, 18.

<sup>67</sup> Rossabi, *China and the Uyghurs*, 128.

<sup>68</sup> Maizland, “China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.”

<sup>69</sup> Byler, “How Companies Profit From Forced Labor in Xinjiang.”

<sup>70</sup> Byler, “How Companies Profit From Forced Labor in Xinjiang.”

National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017.<sup>71</sup> Xi believes economic development is not sufficient for securing the communist party's rule and reviving the China dream. According to Xi, "every *minzu* (nationality, ethnic group) of Xinjiang is a family-member linked to Chinese (*zhonghua*) bloodlines."<sup>72</sup> In growing its economy, China has allowed inequality to seep back into the state, which undermines the validity of the communist model. Ethnic nationalism is a way to unite people, but it is a political construct being used in order to consolidate political power. Additionally, another method that the government is using is to advertise the supremacy of the Han race and portray all ethnic minorities, particularly the Uyghurs, as inferior to the Han. The modern Chinese state wants to depict ethnic minorities as exotic practitioners of 'backward' traditions, and prone to poverty and illiteracy. They are called "barbarians" that need to be "civilized." This is contrasted to the Han majority, who are seen as united, modern, and 'superior.'<sup>73</sup> This exemplifies the government's role in the portrayals of Han Chinese compared with ethnic minorities. Xi wants to do everything in his power in order to depict the "strength" and "intelligence" of the Han people, all the while representing ethnic minorities in a completely contrasting manner that casts a shadow over them.

## Genocide

The Uyghurs are being forced into a cultural assimilation that is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese government has imprisoned more than one million people since 2017 and subjected those not detained to intense surveillance, religious restrictions, forced labor, and forced sterilizations. In 2020, researchers documented 201 reeducation camps and 179 detention centers and prisons.<sup>74</sup> Through coerced insertion of intrauterine devices (80% of all IUD placements in China in 2018 were performed in Xinjiang, which has only 1.8% of the population) and sterilizations and mass detentions, the CCP lowered population growth rates by as much as 84% in Uyghur population areas between 2015 and 2018.<sup>75</sup> The last two U.S. Secretaries of State have labeled China's treatment of the Uyghurs as genocide. Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State under former President Trump, said "we are witnessing the systematic attempt to destroy Uyghurs by the Chinese party-state," and that Chinese authorities "have made clear that they are engaged in the forced assimilation and eventual erasure of a vulnerable ethnic and religious minority group." Similarly, current Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said "forcing men, women and children into concentration camps, trying to, in effect, reeducate them to be

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<sup>71</sup> James Leibold, "China's Assimilationist Turn in Xi Jinping's China," Asia Experts Forum, March 18, 2021, <http://asiaexpertsforum.org/james-leibold-chinas-assimilationist-turn-xi-jinpings-china/>.

<sup>72</sup> Millward, James A. "Notes on Xi Jinping's speech to the 3rd Xinjiang Central Work Forum, 25–26 September 2020," *Medium*. September 27, 2020. <https://jimmillward.medium.com/notes-on-xi-jinpings-speech-to-the-3rd-xinjiang-central-work-forum-25-26-september-2020-768b43242b8f>.

<sup>73</sup> Reza Hasmath, "What Explains the Rise of Majority-Minority Tensions and Conflict in Xinjiang?," *Central Asian Survey* 38(1) (2019): 46. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634937.2018.1496067>.

<sup>74</sup> Maizland, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang."

<sup>75</sup> James A. Millward, "The Uighurs' Suffering Deserves Targeted Solutions, not Anti-Chinese Posturing," *The Guardian*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/27/the-uighurs-suffering-deserves-targeted-solutions-not-anti-chinese-posturing>.

adherents to the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party, all of that speaks to an effort to commit genocide.”<sup>76</sup>

Civilizing missions result in cultural genocide at the least, and in some definitions, full genocide. Along with the massive re-education camps, China’s authorities have intensified organized labor transfers of rural Uyghurs. The overarching goal is to discipline, ‘civilize,’ and assimilate Turkic ethnic minorities from Xinjiang, and to transform them into submissive citizens who accept the state ideology, are obedient to the CCP, and adhere to the culture, values, and habits of the majority Han society.<sup>77</sup> In fact, “Chinese authorities have placed as many as 1.5 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Hui into a system of medium to maximum-security ‘reeducation’ camps since 2017-making it the largest internment of a religious minority since World War II.”<sup>78</sup> To prove they are rehabilitated, Uyghurs must convincingly demonstrate their absolute loyalty and gratitude to China, the Communist Party, and Xi Jinping.<sup>79</sup> Whether China’s treatment of the Uyghurs is labeled as a cultural genocide or a complete genocide, the Chinese government is violating human rights and putting a stain on the country’s image.

## Soft Power

These policies are also diminishing China’s “soft power.” Political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. coined the term soft power, defining it as a country’s ability to influence others without resorting to coercive pressure. In practice, this process entails countries projecting their values, ideals, and culture across borders to foster goodwill and strengthen partnerships. For governments, the rationale is simple: it’s easier to work with others when they are admired and respected, and advancing a foreign policy issue is far easier and cheaper. Advancing national interests is dependent on soft power.<sup>80</sup> China is now the world’s second leading power after the United States and has already overtaken America on some dimensions. It has the capabilities of a global power—the world’s largest population, second largest economy, and largest standing armed forces. However, China is lagging in influence—the ability to shape events and the actions of others.<sup>81</sup> In 2014, during the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping remarked, “we should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s messages to the world.”<sup>82</sup> However, China’s hypernationalism and human rights violations affect China’s narrative. According to an estimate by David Shambaugh,

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<sup>76</sup> John B. Bellinger III, “China’s Abuse of the Uighurs: Does the Genocide Label Fit?” Council on Foreign Relations, February 3, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/article/chinas-abuse-uighurs-does-genocide-label-fit>.

<sup>77</sup> Jan Svec, “Labour Transfers as a Means of ‘Civilizing’ and Forcibly Assimilating Ethnic Minorities in Western China,” *Central Asian Survey*, April 13, 2022, 41:3: 394. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02634937.2022.2054950>.

<sup>78</sup> Byler, *In the Camps: China’s High-Tech Penal Colony*, 21.

<sup>79</sup> Christian Sorace, “The Chinese Communist Party’s Nervous System: Affective Governance from Mao to Xi,” *The China Quarterly*, August 18, 2021. 248(S1). <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/chinese-communist-partys-nervous-system-affective-governance-from-mao-to-xi/E8C371647348F36215592745573FFD09>.

<sup>80</sup> “What is Soft Power?” Council on Foreign Relations, Accessed December 5, 2022. <https://world101.cfr.org/foreign-policy/tools-foreign-policy/what-soft-power>.

<sup>81</sup> David, Shambaugh, “The Illusion of Chinese Power,” *The National Interest*, July-August 2014, 27.

<sup>82</sup> “China’s Soft Power Campaign,” The Wilson Center, accessed December 4, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/chinas-soft-power-campaign>.

a leading China expert, the country spends at least \$10 billion annually on public diplomacy, which is significantly more than any other country.

The investments have not improved views of China in a meaningful way, and in March 2021, the European Union joined the US and Canada in an unprecedented move to impose sanctions on China for the human rights abuses against the Uyghurs.<sup>83</sup> President Biden said that in order for China to become a world leader, it must “gain the confidence of other countries...as long as they are engaged in activity that is contrary to basic human rights, it is going to be hard.”<sup>84</sup> In effect, China is challenged to move their international narrative beyond the issues of human rights.<sup>85</sup> Countries that fear Beijing’s belligerence, power, and growing coercion are building informal coalitions against China in a wide number of areas ranging from semiconductor production, wireless technology, and new types of military relationships. Many universities in the U.S. and Europe have shut down China’s educational Confucius Institutes and also begun cutting links with programs in China, sometimes moving the programs to Taiwan instead. Given the lack of trust, China has weakened its ability to lead on critical global issues such as climate change.<sup>86</sup> In a Pew Study from 2001, large majorities in most of the advanced economies surveyed have broadly negative views of China. This includes three-quarters or more of the population in Japan (88%), Sweden (80%), Australia (78%), South Korea (77%) and the U.S. (76%). In many places, these unfavorable views are at or near historic highs.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, the US diplomatically boycotted the Beijing Olympics in Winter 2022 because of China’s treatment of the Uyghurs. The White House stated that “the Biden administration will not send any diplomatic or official representation to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and Paralympic Games given the PRC’s ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses.”<sup>88</sup> Other countries including Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia also issued a diplomatic boycott. The Olympics is a place where the world comes together and countries can increase and display their individual soft power given the opportunity to show culture and values on a global stage. Despite the value of participation in the Olympics, several countries stayed away from Beijing to take a stand against China’s human rights violations and oppression. Oppression of minorities fueled by Han ethnic nationalism is an obstacle to China being a superpower. Xi and the Chinese government are discovering that “a ruler may use an arsenal of technologies to terrorize a vast territory, but when he confuses harmony with uniformity, he will be weak, and his country small in the eyes of the world.”<sup>89</sup> Despite China’s robust economy, its repressive political

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<sup>83</sup> Martin Gelin, “China’s Influence Campaign Falls Flat,” *The Parliament*, October 14, 2022, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/china-soft-power-failure>.

<sup>84</sup> Campbell, “How Beijing Is Redefining What It Means to Be Chinese, from Xinjiang to Inner Mongolia.”

<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 218.

<sup>86</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, “China’s Poor Global Image Is Undermining Its Strategic Goals,” *The Diplomat*, July 22, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/chinas-poor-global-image-is-undermining-its-strategic-goals/>.

<sup>87</sup> Laura Silver, “Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People,” Pew Research Center, June 30, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/30/large-majorities-say-china-does-not-respect-the-personal-freedoms-of-its-people/>.

<sup>88</sup> “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, December 6, 2021,” The White House, December 6, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/12/06/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-december-6-2021/>.

<sup>89</sup> James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2017, 404.

system that relies on hypernationalism is hindering its quest for soft power throughout much of the world.

## **At Home**

By promoting inequality at home, the CCP has violated its principle of class revolution. The promotion of a unified Han majority rocks the foundation on which the CCP was built. It is a Darwinian game of survival of the fittest where the fittest has already been decided. The CCP's focus is to maintain control at any cost and deploy both the carrot of economic development and the stick of political and religious repression.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, the PRC refuses to recognize the problems. The Han majority dominates the political system which means there is no vehicle for change. Such exploitation for the benefit of the nation-state has the potential to lead to uprisings, radicalization, and revolution.

The recent protests in China against zero COVID policies reflect a backlash against political repression that is intertwined with the repression of ethnic minorities. The Uyghur system of oppression catalyzed the protests. Xinjiang had been under lockdown for a hundred days when a deadly fire broke out in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang, killing ten Uyghurs in late November 2022. Protesters voiced concerns that the extreme lockdowns made it impossible for residents to escape the fire and for authorities to help because of parked cars.<sup>91</sup> The sight of Han Chinese protesting the deaths of Uyghurs is unusual because of the history of the Chinese government justifying its Xinjiang policies by demonizing Uyghurs as terrorists and religious extremists, or at least as ignorant peasants in need of civilizing. Could this be the start of a revolution? It might be “that this bell of solidarity across ethnic lines, once rung, can’t be so easily unrung.”<sup>92</sup> The rise of surveillance technology across China has undoubtedly made the organization and coordination of dissent more difficult. However, while local, single protests are not unusual in China, large decentralized outbreaks that cross boundaries of class and geography almost always end up becoming referendums on the government.<sup>93</sup> Even with signs that the Chinese government will relax some of the repressive zero COVID policies, it may not halt movement towards instability at home related to ethnic issues.

## **Conclusion**

The Chinese government's hypernationalism and corresponding efforts to achieve cultural homogeneity are reminiscent of the behavior of other authoritarian governments that aimed to achieve the absolute power of the state. China is involved in a high risk strategy that could end up undermining the government's power and being its Achilles heel as we have seen in other authoritarian regimes such as Hitler's Nazi State, in which repression undermines ultimate goals. The construction of the unified multinational PRC is “the largest social engineering project in

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<sup>90</sup> Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang in the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 25.

<sup>91</sup> Chang Che and Amy Chang Chien, “Protest in Xinjiang Against Lockdown After Fire Kills 10,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/25/world/asia/china-fire.html>.

<sup>92</sup> James A. Millward, “Why It Matters That China’s Protests Started in Xinjiang,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/06/opinion/china-protests-xinjiang-uyghurs.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Jiayang Fan, “How Dissent Grows in China,” *The New Yorker*, December 7, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/how-dissent-grows-in-china>.



human history.”<sup>94</sup> Is it destined to fail? We are starting to see the cracks. Widespread protests in China are taking hold. On the other hand, if it is true that the US has experienced “waning hegemony in the world” and has moved away from its role in promoting the ideals of democracy and human rights globally, especially at the UN, then the US is also losing soft power which means there could be fewer checks on China.<sup>95</sup>

The issue of citizenship being different from ethnicity is pervasive and is one that we face in the United States where we are still fighting against racism and discrimination. And in the era of globalization, we must address how we preserve ethnicity and guard against marginalization. In all of these contexts, the essential overarching paradigm that should be accepted is that states change and are largely political constructs—but ethnicity is immutable. The true power of any state lies in its consistent and equal treatment of *all* of its citizens—in word and in action.

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<sup>94</sup> Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation*, 125.

<sup>95</sup> Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 250.

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