



# ASIA MAIOR

Special Issue 2 / 2022

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## US-China Competition, COVID-19 and Democratic Backsliding in Asia

Edited by  
Giulio Pugliese  
Andrea Fischetti  
Michelguglielmo Torri

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A large, intricate mandala graphic on the right side of the cover. It features complex, repeating geometric and floral patterns in a dark red color, set against the lighter red background of the cover.

ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES - EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989  
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ISBN 978-88-3313-880-00 (Paper) ISBN 979-12-5469-179-3 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Special Issue, No. 2, 2022

The annual issues of this journal are published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli Extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia. The special issues are published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & by a guest university institution. This issue is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the Robert Schuman Centre – European University Institute.

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CHINA'S OFFICIAL NARRATIVES ON XINJIANG:  
INTERETHNIC MINGLING, ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AND RELIGIOUS TERRORISM\*

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*The northwest province 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 these documents, three main narratives on Xinjiang will be presented, together with the way they have developed over the past decades. Each will then be 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 accord with Chinese governmental strategy as a whole, although the repression in Xinjiang represents their extreme consequences.*

KEYWORDS – China's official narratives; Xinjiang; China's ethnic policies; State developmentalism; counterterrorism.

### *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. Xinjiang is mostly populated by Uyghurs – which is a predominantly Muslim population speaking a Turkic language – but it is also the homeland of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Sarikoli, Tajiks and other nationalities. The Uyghurs are one of the 56 officially recognized ethnic groups living in the PRC, with the majority represented by the Han.

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.<sup>1</sup> In the past three years, there has been an escalation in intensity

\* I wish to thank Giulio Pugliese, Silvia Menegazzi, Martin Lavička and the three anonymous reviewers for their precious feedback and insightful comments.

of the debate and research among Western governments, foreign media and scholars and international organisations on what is going on in Xinjiang.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a '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 the 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 (Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, Washington, DC) and Joanne Smith Finley (Newcastle University) who have long produced work on Xinjiang.<sup>4</sup>

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'.<sup>5</sup> There have

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](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 to report 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](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.



been reports of the demolition of mosques and sacred shrines as well as other sites that are centres of Uyghur cultural, religious and social life;<sup>6</sup> the secularisation of Xinjiang's non-Han through the Han population's surveillance on their private life;<sup>7</sup> not to mention the disappearance, imprisonment or death of many Uyghurs who dared to raise their voices against the state-perpetrated violence.<sup>8</sup> These are just a few of the techniques of repression that scholars have pointed out so far.<sup>9</sup>

The common explanation provided by foreign scholarly literature for the mounting state repression in Xinjiang are: 1) a shift in the CCP's ethnic policy;<sup>10</sup> 2) the increased contention in the region resulting from 'terrorist attacks' (as they are referred to officially);<sup>11</sup> 3) the CCP's perception of security threats from international terrorism organizations (especially jihadist) and the connections between them and non-Han population in China<sup>12</sup> and

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 İlham Tohtu is perhaps the most prominent figure who was repressed by the authorities for challenging the Party's approach to developing Xinjiang and managing inter-ethnic relations. He was charged with «separatism» and sentenced to life in prison. For an updated list of the victims, see Xinjiang Victims Database (<https://shahit.biz/eng/#stats>).

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 (<https://uhrp.org/bibliography/>).

10. On the new ethnic policy see: Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein's Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China's Quest to Become a «Normal Country»', *The China Journal*, No. 86, 2021, pp. 46-67. Other sources are quoted in the following section of this essay.

11. 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 have been 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.

12. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee & Emir Yazici, 'Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression: China's Changing Strategy in Xinjiang', *International Security*, Vo. 44, No. 3, 2020, pp. 9-47.

4) the appointment of Chen Quanguo as Xinjiang Party Secretary.<sup>13</sup> In addition, scholarly literature pays increasing attention to the connections and linkages between the state-perpetrated violence in Xinjiang and global economic and ideological dynamics.<sup>14</sup> These explanations greatly contribute to understanding the rationale behind the CCP's policy towards Xinjiang, and indeed, the following section will show how they (except for the role played by Chen Quanguo, which is beyond the scope of this analysis) are crucial in China's official narrative on the Xinjiang issue, as is emerging from the analysis of official documents.

However, this paper attempts to look at the Xinjiang issue from a different perspective, placing it in the broader political configuration that has taken shape in the PRC in recent years, especially since Xi Jinping took office. Therefore, instead of emphasising the peculiarities of Beijing's activities in the region and/or towards ethnic minorities in the PRC, this paper posits that the paradigms sustaining the official view on Xinjiang are by no means limited to this region but characterize the country's overall strategy of governance. This is particularly apparent when it comes to the CCP's control over the society and the new security strategy in the era of slower economic growth. The special approach of this paper arises from fact that the binary view 'authoritarianism vs democracy' not merely conceals the global connections linking the Xinjiang issues with global capitalism,<sup>15</sup> but also fails to capture the internal transformations in the world of Chinese politics, simplistically defined as an 'authoritarian regime'. Contextualising the way in which the Xinjiang issue is officially framed in the larger context helps us to grasp the continuities and discontinuities in China's political discourse, gauging that it is also part of broader transformations that are taking place.

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 generally created by governments with the aim of communicating their standpoint and informing the public on specific issues. However, in China they are characterized mainly as a reaction to external criticism.<sup>16</sup> 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

13. Adrian Zenz & James Leibold, 'Chen Quanguo: The Strongman behind Beijing's Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang', *China Brief*, Vol. 17, No. 12, 2017, pp. 16-24.

14. Darren Byler, Ivan Franceschini & Nicholas Loubere (eds.), *Xinjiang Year Zero*, Canberra: Australian National University, 2022.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Martin Lavička, 'Narrating Xinjiang through the Lens of Governmental White papers', paper presented at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Biannual Conference of the European Association of Chinese Studies, 24 August 2021.

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.<sup>17</sup>

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) China’s developmentalism and China’s ‘civilising’ project; and 3) the Xinjiang question as part of the US-led global war on terror. In the following pages, these 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 placing the Xinjiang issue in the context of the current re-centralisation of power in the hands of the CCP and of the party’s 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; and 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) [Xinjiang] 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’.<sup>18</sup> 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 thus be characterized by a political continuity that legitimizes the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over Xinjiang as well as over other provinces and territories. In the official view, this makes the Chinese nation unique in the annals of civilisations for its uninterrupted history of five millennia.

17. 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/>.

18. 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>).

The Han (206 BC – 220 AD) and 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 contact with the states commonly defined as Chinese dynasties.<sup>19</sup> However, today's Xinjiang has not been part of all the Chinese empires, nor has it always been a unified political entity. The Qing empire (1644-1912) – whose rulers were clearly identified as being Manchu, thus non-Han – placed Xinjiang under its control in 1759.<sup>20</sup> At the time, the north-western frontiers were defined through a complex system of alliances with local Muslims, in which Muslims, as well as the other cultural blocks (Han, Manchu, Mongols, and Tibetans), enjoyed recognition.<sup>21</sup> The imposition of the nation-state paradigm by foreign imperialism made this system unworkable, forcing movement towards a new conceptualization of the Qing State based on territorial integrity. When the Qing empire collapsed in 1911, 'territorial integrity' defined by clear-cut borders became one of the main criteria defining 'China' as a political entity, and keeping the territories of the ex-Qing empire united was perceived by early nationalists, and later also by Communists, as a priority.<sup>22</sup> In 1949, the PRC built its territorial 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 to being two of China's non-negotiable 'national core interests',<sup>23</sup> intimately linked to the principle of 'non-interference' in domestic affairs which has been advocated since the 1950s.<sup>24</sup> Indeed,

19. In using 'empire' in place of 'dynasties', I follow James A. Millward, who has recently raised awareness on the language used to describe China's history. James A. Millward, *Decolonizing Chinese Historiography with special attention to Xinjiang*, video of full lecture with presentation slides, sponsored by Cornell East Asia Program, co-sponsored by the Levinson China and Asia-Pacific Studies (CAPS) Program, Cornell University, 25 October 2021 ([https://vimeo.com/639170697?fbclid=IwAR1G5qnxOS-It\\_YMyZijxKdYxe33iBWUmzK3CP\\_Ahc2lWivP5UyJFQPd9Ps](https://vimeo.com/639170697?fbclid=IwAR1G5qnxOS-It_YMyZijxKdYxe33iBWUmzK3CP_Ahc2lWivP5UyJFQPd9Ps)).

20. James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759-1864*, Stanford (California): Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 32.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 197-202.

22. On the process of nation-building from late Qing to the PRC, see also Ye Hui, 'Nation-building as epistemic violence', in Darren Byler, Ivan Franceschini & Nicholas Loubere (eds.), *Xinjiang Year Zero*, Canberra: Australian National University, 2022, pp. 19-30.

23. According to the WP 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; and 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](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/whitepaper_665742/t856325.shtml)).

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

'national sovereignty' and 'territorial integrity' are often cited to counter criticism of state-led violence in Xinjiang.<sup>25</sup>

Against the backdrop of the '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, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping delivered a speech at the Central Xinjiang Work Symposium where he specified that the solution for the 'Xinjiang issue' (*Xinjiang de wenti* 新疆的问题) is to reinforce unity among nationalities, a goal which must be achieved through increasing interethnic 'contacts, exchanges and mingling' (*jiaowang, jiaoliu, jiaorong* 交往交流交融) as well as through promoting the 'consciousness of the unified community of the Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi* 中华民族共同体意识)<sup>26</sup>.<sup>27</sup> After Xi's talk, both expressions began to be widely used in WPs.

Xi Jinping's call for interethnic 'mingling' as a way out of the 'Xinjiang issue' represents a turning point in the CCP's ethnic policy.<sup>28</sup> Since its early days, the CCP has committed itself to recognising the existence of ethnonational diversity within the territory of the ex-Qing empire. This pledge by the CCP stood in contrast to the assimilationist approach of the Nationalist Party, i.e., Guomindang, which saw the integration of the non-Han nationalities into the Han majority as unavoidable. By adopting a different attitude towards non-Han population, the members of the CCP presented themselves as the 'good Han',<sup>29</sup> and were able to win support from non-Han peoples during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that the CCP's recognition of 'national identities' living within the territories of the ex-Qing empire did not mean guaranteeing their right to political secession:

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

26. I translate *gongtongti* 共同体 as 'unified community', instead of giving the usual translation 'community', because 'unified community', as Bulag also argues, better captures the intended meaning. Interestingly enough, this meaning is also conveyed by the morphemic composition of the term itself, which gives the idea of sharing a unified 'body' (*ti* 体). Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein's Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China's Quest to Become a «Normal Country»'.

27. 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\\_126364529.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/photo/2014-05/29/c_126364529.htm)).

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

29. Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Good Han, Bad Han: The Moral Parameters of Ethnopolitics in China', in Thomas S. Mullaney *et al.* (eds.), *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 92–109.

30. Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein's Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China's Quest to Become a «Normal Country»'.

the Leninist principle of self-determination for non-Han nationalities was deleted from the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Government already in the 1934.<sup>31</sup> From the 1950s onwards, the newly centralized state of the PRC based its legitimacy on the political configuration of 'the people of all nationalities' and defined itself as a 'unitary multinational state'. It established a system borrowed from the Soviet Union, based on granting territorial autonomy to those areas populated mostly by non-Han nationalities.<sup>32</sup> The Xinjiang Uyghurs Autonomous Region was the product of this political stance, along with the other four autonomous regions of Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Tibet, and Ningxia. Accordingly, over the past few decades, the central government has tended to emphasize 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, for which regional nationalisms were held responsible, sparked an intellectual and political debate on the soundness of the autonomous system. The relation between the state and the national minorities living in the PRC is increasingly perceived as 'antagonistic'.<sup>33</sup> As a consequence, 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.<sup>34</sup> Xi Jinping's speech at the Central Xinjiang Work Symposium in 2014 tacitly approved this 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 has even been applied retrospectively, emphasizing 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'

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

32. The system of territorial autonomy implies, for instance, that positions of local leadership should be reserved for officials belonging to local minority nationalities. However, the degree of this autonomy is debated, and largely varies from one area to another.

33. Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Minority Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein's Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China's Quest to Become a «Normal Country»'.

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

and that, despite their ethnic Turkic origins, they are not descendants of Turks; only in 1934 did the name 'Uyghur' emerge as the standard Chinese appellation for the people residing in Xinjiang.<sup>35</sup> It goes without saying that this had an evident intent of discrediting separatist tendencies. It cannot be denied that the 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 the question of ethnicity did not feature so crucially, before the formation of nation-states.<sup>36</sup>

As far as the ethnonym *Hanzu* (汉族) is concerned, it is also a neologism coined in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>37</sup> but in this case China's official narrative adopted a different attitude. The *Hanzu* is described as being extremely ancient, so ancient that it can be traced back centuries: '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'.<sup>38</sup>

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 unified community of the Chinese nation' mentioned above leverages on the sense of belonging to a common 'Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华

35. '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>).

36. As Gladney points out, nomadic steppe people called 'Uyghurs' have existed since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but their cultural and religious identity was neither fixed nor internally coherent. We lack hard evidence to understand the exact time when the ethnonym Uyghur was used for the settled Turkic-speaking Muslim people. It became recognized by the Soviet Union and the newly created Chinese nation in 1940s. Dru C. Gladney, 'The ethnogenesis of the Uighurs', *Central Asian Survey*, Issue 9, No. 1, 1990, pp 1-28.

37. 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 in Thomas S. Mullaney *et al.*, (eds.), *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*, pp. 173-190.

38. 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>).

民族). This latter is an expression coined by the reformist and intellectual Liang Qichao at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In an essay written in 1905, Liang Qichao defined the ‘Chinese nation’ as basically a synonym for *Hanzu*, which at the time was ambiguously used to refer to the Han race and the Sinic cultural community.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding his emphasis on the inclusive nature of the ‘Chinese nation’, the introduction of this terminology by Liang paved the way for a conceptualisation of a Han-centred Chinese nation by Republican-era elites, for whom *Hanzu* was a racial category clearly distinct from the Manchu, Tibetans, Muslims, and Mongols.<sup>40</sup> After the founding of the PRC, as mentioned above, the idea of a Han-centric Chinese nation was partially side-lined by the political identity of ‘the people of all nationalities’. Recently, however, it has come to the fore again. 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),<sup>41</sup> a signature slogan under Xi Jinping which recalls Sun Yatsen’s call to ‘reinvigorate’ (*zhengxing* 振兴) China.<sup>42</sup>

‘Interethnic mingling’ within the ‘Chinese nation’, namely the building of the Chinese on Han ethnic majoritarianism, appears to be more an integral part of China’s overall strategy, than just a means to solve interethnic conflicts. The ‘consciousness of the unified community of the Chinese nation’, the ‘identification with Chinese culture’ (*Zhonghua wenhua rentong* 中华文化认同),<sup>43</sup> and the promotion of a ‘China spirit’ (*Zhongguo jingshen* 中国精神) (another expression which echoes Sun Yatsen’s vocabulary of the

39. When quoting Liang Qichao’s article, Bulag does not clarify the meaning of *Hanzu*. Bulag, ‘Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein’s Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China’s Quest to Become a «Normal Country»’, p. 47. Leibold instead maintains that *Hanzu* at the turn of the century was mainly used to refer to the Sinic cultural and political community. Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism*, p. 186. Thus the term is quite ambiguous.

40. Wang Hui indeed refers to Liang Qichao’s nationalism as ‘Chinese nationalism’, setting it apart from the kind of ‘Han nationalism’ advocated by the revolutionaries. Wang Hui, *Impero o Stato-Nazione? La modernità intellettuale in Cina* (Empire or Nation-State? Intellectual modernity in China), Milan: Academia Universa Press, pp. 60-64.

41. 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/guofqing/2018-03/22/content\\_5276318.htm](http://www.gov.cn/guofqing/2018-03/22/content_5276318.htm).

42. Orville Schell & John Delury, *Wealth and Power: China’s Long March to the Twenty-first Century*, New York: Random House Inc., 2013.

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



early 20<sup>th</sup>-century vocabulary)<sup>44</sup> are all indicators of an attempt to forge a nation-mindedness – with a strong Han accent – aiming to ‘unite’ the Chinese people around the CCP, a project which goes far beyond the borders of the PRC and includes overseas Chinese.<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup> The results of these efforts are, for instance, the ‘socialist core values’ (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhiguan* 社会主义核心价值观) promoted since 2012, which marry values belonging to the Confucian tradition with modern principles.<sup>47</sup>

The ‘socialist core values’ are also quoted in one of the WPs issued in 2019, and are placed in relation to the need to ‘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, [...] and actively guide various religions, including Islam, to follow the path (*daolu* 道路) of sinicization (*Zhongguohua* 中国化)’.<sup>48</sup> 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), that is the adaptation of Marxism to China’s socio-economic reality. By looking at the way in which the view of ‘religious sinicization’ is conveyed in the WP, it seems to refer to a set of top-down rules that the religious practitioners

44. 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.

45. 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.

46. 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>).

47. The ‘socialist core values’ are organized on three levels: the values pertaining to the state (‘wealth and power’, ‘democracy’, ‘civility’, ‘harmony’); to the society (‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘justice’, ‘rule by law’) and third, those pertaining to individual citizens (‘patriotism’, ‘dedication’, ‘integrity’, and ‘friendship’). Their structure, based on three layers of morality, is connected to the doctrine of Mencius (372-289 BCE), one of the most important of Confucian philosophers, according to whom: ‘Among the people there is the common saying, “The empire, the state, the family.” The empire has its basis in the state; the state has its basis in the family, and the family has its basis in oneself’. Mencius 4A5, in Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Mencius* - Translated by Irene Bloom. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 76.

48. State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang*, Glasgow: Good Press, 2021.

should abide by, rather than a process of hybridisation and adaptation of religious beliefs and customs to China's broad culture and aesthetics. Indeed, 'sinicization' is metaphorically represented by a 'path' (*daolu*) that religions in the PRC should follow.

## 2.2. *Promoting economic development and increasing peoples' quality*

As a Leninist Party, the CCP views material progress as a linear path. Not all the peoples, however, are deemed to progress at the same pace, and non-Han nationalities have been denigrated as lagging behind China's dominant ethnicity, the Han, in terms of socioeconomic development.<sup>49</sup> 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 – and similar to the colonial 'civilising' mission – non-Han populations are backwards and need Han intervention in order to benefit from development and modernity. This assumption is implicit in the above-mentioned 'peaceful liberation' phrase: emphasising that Xinjiang gained its freedom thanks to the CCP tacitly implies that the local population was unable to reach freedom by themselves.

All the WPs try to substantiate this argument by comparing the backward economic structure in Xinjiang and the development brought about by the founding of the 'New China' (*xin Zhongguo* 新中国), that is the PRC. Quantitative data are used to this end. 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.<sup>50</sup> Grounded on a view of 'science' as the 'authoritative knowledge' and 'ultimate arbiter of "truth"' in modern society,<sup>51</sup> precise quantification and extensive use of numerical data demonstrate the objectivity and incontrovertibility of the authorities' arguments about Xinjiang's 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,<sup>52</sup> China's authorities' official narrative seemingly utilizes 'develop-

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

50. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *History and development of Xinjiang* (<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ccin/eng/ssygd/UrungqiRiot/t573267.htm>).

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

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

ment' as a shield to protect from international and domestic criticism on the Xinjiang issue. More recently, the claimed '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 floating signifier 'human rights' (*renquan* 人权) as a discursive tool in order to defend itself from the charge of human rights violations in Xinjiang. Indeed, the last of the WPs issued in 2021 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'.<sup>53</sup> In this way, the WP also promotes a definition of 'human rights' that attaches major importance to the 'right to subsistence' (*shengcun quan* 生存权) and 'right to development' (*fazhan quan* 发展权), defined as the 'most important human rights'.<sup>54</sup> In particular, the 'right to development' is further described as 'the essential precondition for the realisation of all human rights'.<sup>55</sup> The 'right to subsistence' and the 'right to development' are included in international human rights, alongside civil and political rights. But in the PRC's official discourse on human rights, they are at the heart. Beijing started participating in the work on human rights since the 1980s, as in Maoist China human rights were rejected as 'bourgeois slogans'. But it is in the post-June Fourth era that the PRC's authorities have adopted a more proactive policy on human rights.<sup>56</sup> In 1991, Beijing published its first White Paper ever, which indeed dealt with human rights.<sup>57</sup> Starting as a reaction to international criticism on the violent repression of the Tiananmen movement, the official stance on human rights in China soon evolved into an active promulgation of its own position internationally. In its appropriation of the concept of human rights, China's authorities maintain that safeguarding human rights depends on the level of economic development.

In light of the above, it is not surprising that the officially named '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

53. 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>).

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. Marina Svensson, *Debating Human Rights in China*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002 (eBook).

57. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 中国的人权状况 (Human rights in China), 1 November 1991 (<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/1991/Document/1715811/1715811.htm>).

order to uphold the protection of human rights. This is where Xinjiang's non-Han population (mostly Uyghurs) have been interned since 2017. 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).<sup>58</sup> According to this narrative, the 'vocational education and training centres' are thus framed as a way to increase job opportunities and therefore a leverage for the economic prosperity of the region. This, in turn, entails that they guarantee the protection of the most important human right from Beijing's perspective, namely the 'right to development'.

Interestingly, Muller argues that since the mid 2010s, the emphasis in China's official discourse on human rights has switched 'from subsistence to development'.<sup>59</sup> This is even more interesting in light of the meaning of 'development' in China's official discourse. 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 aims are to 'help the trainees to emancipate their minds, improve their quality (*suzhi* 素质) and their development prospects'.<sup>60</sup> 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 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 starting in 1979.<sup>61</sup> For the non-Han population, the policy was less rigid, usually allowing non-Han couples one additional child: only one child was allowed for Han Chinese living in urban area and two for those living in the countryside, while non-Han population in urban areas were permitted to have two children and three in rural areas. Nowadays, while the strict limits once imposed are gradually relaxing, the distinctions

58. The State 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>).

59. Wim Muller, 'Subsistence, poverty alleviation and right to development: between discourse and practice', in Sarah Biddulph & Joshua Rosenzweig (eds.), *Handbook of Human Rights in China*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2019, pp. 128-131.

60. The State 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>).

61. Susan Greenhalgh & Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China's Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005; Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008.

between Han and non-Han population have been erased and the birth-control policy has been coercively applied to the Uyghurs since 2017.<sup>62</sup> As was the case four decades ago, 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 social engineering aimed at 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*

Scholarly literature has 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' (*san gu 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.<sup>63</sup>

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), the SCO adopted the 'Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism'.<sup>64</sup> The concept of the 'three evils' unified 'separatism', 'terrorism' and 'extremism', paving the way for Beijing authorities branding all perceived 'separatist' threats as 'terrorism'.<sup>65</sup>

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 justification for China's state-led suppression of dissenting voices as well as religious practices in Xinjiang.

62. 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. Adrian Zenz, *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP's Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang*, Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, June 2020 (<https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Zenz-Internment-Sterilizations-and-IUDs-REVISED-March-17-2021.pdf?x90712>).

63. James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, pp. 69-75; Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*.

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

65. Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, p. 68.

Chinese authorities defined as terrorism certain acts of violence among the Uyghurs over the previous decades, which had in truth been the product of spontaneous outrage against abuses, rather than 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.<sup>66</sup> 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 designating 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 the organization responsible for all the violence. This slip by the US was later incorporated into by China's official narrative. Thus, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement became singled out as the sole organization responsible for all the alleged Uyghur-perpetrated violence that occurred over the previous decades in China.<sup>67</sup>

Surfing the wave of Islamophobia worldwide,<sup>68</sup> 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'.<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup> In 2017, counterterrorism measures began to be applied on a mass scale, marking the shift from selective to collective repression.<sup>71</sup> This shift has implied that, in addition to punitive detention on specific individuals, increased surveillance and mass political re-education started targeting a wide swath of Xinjiang Muslim population.

66. James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, pp. 330–32. Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, pp. 69–75.

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

68. David Brophy, 'Good and Bad Muslims in Xinjiang', *Made in China Journal*, Issue 4, No. 2, 9 July 2019.

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

70. Counterterrorism Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国反恐恐怖主义法). For comments on the Law, see Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, p. 178.

71. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee & Emir Yazici, 'Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression: China's Changing Strategy in Xinjiang', *International Security*, Vo. 44, No. 3, 2020, pp. 9–47.

The repressive measures applied in Xinjiang were, therefore, no longer framed as merely combating the ‘separatism’ that threatened China, but as part of global efforts to thwart ‘terrorism’ and fight ‘religious extremism’. ‘Separatism’ was initially deemed to be the ‘hotbed’ (*wenchuang* 温床) of the other two ‘evils’, to use official terminology,<sup>72</sup> but has been less emphasized since the declaration of the ‘people’s war on terror’. The lesser importance now attached to ‘separatism’ is apparent when one looks at the ostensible mission of the ‘vocational education and training centre’, which is fighting ‘religious extremism’ and ‘terrorism’, but does not explicitly target ‘separatism’.<sup>73</sup> This emphasis is based on a cause-effect link between the ‘increase of religious extremism worldwide since the end of the Cold War’ and the rise of ‘religious terrorism in Xinjiang’.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, scholarly literature argues that the CCP’s concerns for the ties between Uyghurs and jihadist groups abroad resulted, on the one hand, in the upgrade of repressive measures in Xinjiang and, on the other, in China’s growing involvement in counterterrorism cooperation abroad.<sup>75</sup> In this way, the Chinese ‘people’s war on terrorism’ evolved into a ‘global war on terror’.

#### 2.4. *Placing the Xinjiang issue in the larger context: The Party’s leading role and a new approach to ‘stability maintenance’*

While the three main narratives underlying the Xinjiang issue have been outlined, 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 recentralization of power in the hands of the CCP; second, the role played by a new approach to ‘stability maintenance’ in China’s political discourse.

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. The well-known wording of the political report issued at the 19<sup>th</sup> 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*

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

73. The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, ‘*Vocational education and training in Xinjiang*’.

74. The State 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>).

75. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghhee Lee & Emir Yazici, ‘Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression’.

de 党政军民学，东西南北中，党是领导一切的).<sup>76</sup> Specifically as regards 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 the latter.<sup>77</sup> 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 views asserting 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’.<sup>78</sup> 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’. The current crackdown on religions, and on Islam in particular, is part of a broader process aimed at re-establishing the CCP’s control on ideology in all fields of China’s society. As stated above, this process is officially called ‘sinicization’, but it is not limited to religions. It has been applied 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).<sup>79</sup>

In addressing the new approach to ‘stability maintenance’ adopted by the Party, scholars have emphasized that, in Xinjiang, ‘the CCP had inverted its formerly declared relationship between development and stability’.<sup>80</sup> In other words, China’s authorities no longer believe that economic development and prosperity are tools to achieve ‘social stability’. This view has been further fuelled by the CCP’s perception of growing threats coming

76. 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’, 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 18 October 2017 ([http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping%27s\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping%27s_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf)).

77. 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.

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

79. 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](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/14/c_1116825558.htm)).

80. Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China’s Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority: China’s Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, p. 175.



from the ties between Uyghurs and jihadist groups abroad and by the CCP's concern that Xinjiang Muslim population are vulnerable to religious extremism, and thus need to be 'immunized'.<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> A WP issued in 2019 defines 'preventive' measures as 'top priority (*yufang di yi wei* 预防第一位).<sup>83</sup> 'Prevention' manifests as 'transformation through education' (*jiaoyu zhuanhua* 教育转化), a practice which was previously applied to the members of the Falun Gong. In Xinjiang, this same practice led to the construction of the reeducation camps.<sup>84</sup>

While it cannot be denied that this new approach to 'stability maintenance' finds its extreme consequence in Xinjiang, this paper argues that this perspective can be viewed as part of a broader governance strategy that was being developed even before Xi Jinping's emergence, though it has escalated under his leadership. Against the backdrop of China's lower GDP growth rate, the CCP has been still harsher in repressing all those voices that may represent a threat to its rule, but it has even silenced those potentially inconvenient voices that do not express any direct dissent.<sup>85</sup> In other words, whether it be explicit dissidents or within-the-system changemakers, such as NGOs or labour activists,<sup>86</sup> all are now the target of state repression. A new emphasis on ideology has gone hand in hand with new limitations on freedom of expression.<sup>87</sup> In light of this, the CCP applies a 'preventive' approach to the whole society, attempting to bar anything that may threaten its leadership. This approach is developing alongside a growing emphasis on the need to safeguard China's 'security'.

81. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee & Emir Yazici, 'Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression'.

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

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

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

85. 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. The crackdown has involved also the media

86. Human rights organisations argue that already during the first five-year term of Xi Jinping's administration, the number of activists detained has tripled from the previous year: 'Detentions of Chinese Activists Tripled Last Year: Report', *Radio Free Asia*, 3 March 2014.

87. 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.

According to Sulmaan Wasif Khan, preserving security has always been part of the ‘grand strategy’ of China’s leadership.<sup>88</sup> Yet, while the previous generation of leaders adopted at times flexible approaches to ‘stability maintenance’, under Xi zero tolerance is shown. A series of country-level reforms provides evidence of this new discursive emphasis. In 2013, a Central National Security Commission (*Zhongyang guojia 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). 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’.<sup>89</sup> Thus, it encompasses both internal and external threats. 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.<sup>90</sup> 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, figuring prominently in all the WPs released since that year. Whether the ‘preventive’ approach to stability maintenance was triggered by Beijing’s heightened sensitivity towards transnational terrorist threats or not,<sup>91</sup> it has *de jure* applied to the entire Chinese society already since 2015.

### 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 better understand the ground on which the Chinese authorities justify their actions in the region and understanding whether Beijing’s behaviour in Xinjiang is an and towards ethnic minority is an exception within the largest context of Xi Jinping’s China or not. It has investigated the 11

88. Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos. China’s Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2018.

89. 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 2.

90. National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China (2015), Section 1, Article 9.

91. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee & Emir Yazici, ‘Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression’.

White Papers issued by the State's Council Information Office since 2003, which specifically address the Xinjiang issue.

It is clear 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 way of handling 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-centric. Interestingly, they portray Xi Jinping's view of China as being closer to Sun Yatsen's idea of 'Chinese nation' than to that promoted by the CCP in its early days. This new ethnic policy manifests, as Bulag maintains, the Party's attempt to 'complete the Chinese mission of finding a national form compatible with its state form'.<sup>92</sup> Second, Chinese state developmentalism contributes to discursively justifying the repressive measures as necessary to propel Xinjiang's economic development and to improve the 'quality' of the non-Han population. By defining 'development' as the most important 'human right', Beijing reacts to foreign criticism by using the same wording and also challenges the meaning of 'human right' as it is generally used in the US and the EU. 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'.

The analysis has attempted to provide insights into the way in which these three narratives interact with previous discourses and, in most cases, are informed by the ideological views that sustain Beijing's approach to the entirety of Chinese society, not merely Xinjiang. This is even more apparent when it comes to the CCP's level of control. Indeed, this paper argues that the state repression of religious belief accords with the Party's recent emphasis on its guiding role in all spheres of social life. This, in turn, materializes in a new approach to 'stability maintenance' aimed at uprooting all the potential threats to the Party's grip on power. This 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' represent the point at which China's domestic and foreign policies blur into one another. This is especially evident in Xinjiang, 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 are manifestations of the Party's growing assertiveness in defending 'core interests' in and out of the PRC's borders.

92. Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Minority Minority Nationalities as Frankenstein's Monsters? Reshaping «the Chinese Nation» and China's Quest to Become a «Normal Country»', p. 47.

