



CURRENTS: AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF INHUMANITY
IN XINJIANG: EVIDENCE, COMPARISON,
RHETORIC AND REFLECTIONS

Tabula rasa

Han settler colonialism and frontier genocide in “re-educated” Xinjiang

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In his analysis of the frontier genocides waged against the Aboriginal Tasmanians, the Yuki of California, and the Herero of Namibia, Benjamin Madley (2004) identified three phases. The first is initiated by colonial invasion: economic and political frictions develop as settlers and indigenous peoples struggle for limited resources and power. In Phase Two, indigenous peoples attack settlers to reclaim lost resources and land, and this prompts a genocidal military campaign. In Phase Three, the settlers’ government incarcerates the indigenous peoples in concentration camps, where it continues genocide by attrition (through malnutrition, inadequate medical care, overwork, unsanitary conditions, and violence). All three genocides began with the assertion that the land was empty or should be made empty. Here, I consider how far the concept *tabula rasa* (“a map scraped clean”) applies to contemporary “re-educated” Xinjiang on China’s northwest frontier.

Keywords: settler colonialism, frontier genocide, Xinjiang, Uyghurs, German Southwest Africa, re-education

Writing in the *Journal of Genocide Research* in 2004, anthropologist Benjamin Madley stressed the need to identify patterns across historical cases of genocide, to deepen understanding of “man’s worst crime: the attempt to obliterate an entire people” (Madley 2004: 167)¹ and allow detection, prevention, and intervention with respect to future cases:

During the twentieth century, dozens of states implemented policies intended to physically destroy indigenous populations. In the age of the UN Genocide Convention, signatory nations waged campaigns of genocide

against the Cham of Cambodia, indigenous peoples in East Timor and the Amazon basin, Iraqi Kurds, the Maya of Guatemala, and others . . . No evidence suggests a waning of this trend. (Madley 2004: 167)

In “Patterns of frontier genocide 1803–1910,” Madley compared three cases occurring on different continents at different times: 1) the British settlers and the Aboriginal Tasmanians (1803–1847), focusing on the concept *terra nullius* (“virgin territory,” land that belongs to no one); 2) the White European settlers and the Californian Yuki (1851–1910), focusing on the principle *vacuum domicilium* (“vacant lands,” lacking fixed habitations and fenced fields); and 3) the German settlers and the Herero of Namibia (1905–1906) focusing on the notion *tabula rasa* (“a map scraped clean”) (Madley 2004). Below, I consider the extent to which “de-extremification” and “re-education” policies deployed in Xinjiang by the Chinese party-state since 2014 might be viewed as a genocidal process to create *tabula rasa*, as manifested in Germany’s historical colonization of Southwest Africa. In

1. In the context of conceptual debates around the terms genocide versus cultural genocide, it is important to note from the outset that, following World War II, states, for their own self-serving reasons, decided to restrict the definition in international law of the destruction of nations (genocide) to its physical/biological dimensions only, by the five means set out in the 1948 UN Genocide Convention (Moses 2021).



doing so, I refer to certain other comparable cases of frontier genocide occurring elsewhere.

Madley's model of frontier genocide

Madley identified three phases in the conduct of frontier genocide, as follows:

1. *Colonial invasion*: leading to the development of economic and political frictions (struggle for natural resources and power), and the denial of indigenous rights by incoming settlers.
2. *Indigenous guerrilla insurgency*: local people attack the settlers and their property in an attempt to regain resources and power; the state embarks on a military genocidal campaign as "an operational solution to a difficult war."
3. *"Final solution"*: indigenous peoples are incarcerated in camps and reservations reminiscent of the Soviet gulag; this step "finalises the indigenous people's dispossession" and "completes their political emasculation." They are subjected to slow genocide through malnutrition, unsanitary conditions, inadequate medical care, and violence. (Madley 2004: 167–68; 189–90)

If we consider the current Xinjiang case against the above pattern, we find striking similarities as well as certain differences. With respect to Phase One, "colonial invasion," we can point to a gradual colonial process by which the Uyghur homeland was involuntarily incorporated into the Chinese nation-state. Large-scale Chinese expansion into the region occurred first during the 1700s, and the colonial nature of that interaction was underlined in 1884 when Qing authorities renamed the region "Xinjiang" ("New Frontier"), making it an official province of China (Millward 2021). However, prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949, Han settlement in the region remained minimal. It was only in the 1950s that waves of CCP "pioneers" were sent into Xinjiang to "reclaim the land" and initiate Han settlement under the auspices of the paramilitary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) (Cliff 2016). By 1970, the proportion of Han settlers in the region had increased dramatically from around 5 to around 40 percent. The 1980s and 1990s saw continued Han settlement, with some migrating voluntarily to take advantage

of center-driven regional economic development, which disproportionately benefited incoming Han settlers over local people. This push to integrate Xinjiang in terms of economy and infrastructure accelerated through the 2000s following the launch of the Great Western Development Campaign (GWDC) (Becquelin 2004; Smith Finley 2013).

Up until 2009, the PRC state pursued a "carrot and stick" model consisting of economic development accompanied by periodic "Strike Hard" campaigns against so-called "separatist elements." However, a demonstration-turned-riot that erupted in the regional capital Ürümqi in 2009 marked a decisive turning point. The "carrot and stick" model was replaced in 2010 by one that favored an increasingly colonial form of accelerated development, combined with a strategy of "permanent security." Economic development was hastened via the existing National Partner Assistance Program (NPAP), which twinned wealthy cities in China's east with impoverished towns in the west (Li 2018), and led rapidly to greater involvement of Han companies from the east in Xinjiang's construction and modernization, while expediting new settlement by Han Chinese from outside. Then, following two apparently terrorist attacks conducted by Uyghurs in Beijing and Kunming in 2013 and 2014, respectively, the policy of development was sidelined altogether, and the Chinese state switched to a campaign of "long-term control and permanent order" (Ch. *changzhi jiu'an*) (Klimeš 2018). The above process has been described by anthropologist Sean Roberts (2020) as one that gradually transitioned Xinjiang from a "frontier colony" in the 1700s to a "settler colony" in the present.

With respect to Madley's Phase Two, "indigenous guerrilla insurgency" met by "military genocidal campaign," there have been sporadic protests by local people in Xinjiang, which responded in part to certain political moments, but more particularly to the implementation of unpopular PRC state policies. The first major incident post-1949 came in 1990, when local people in Kashgar prefecture responded to increased religious restrictions imposed by the state, leading to the Baren insurrection (Rodríguez-Merino 2019). In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and formation of independent Central Asian states in 1991, the 1990s saw rising ethno-political aspirations to independence among young Uyghur men. There was subsequently a marked increase in attacks on state agents and infrastructure alongside attacks on, and assassinations of, indigenous officials and religious personnel perceived as "collaborators." These attacks, which

so far did not target Han civilians, responded to growing inequalities in language use, education, employment, wealth distribution, economy (especially resource extraction), and political representation, linked to rising Han in-migration (Smith Finley 2013). In 1997, a peaceful demonstration against religious restrictions in Ghulja was met with disproportionate force by state agents, following which it turned violent; protesters were later subjected to mass executions and disappearances (Amnesty International 1999). However, the key turning point came in 2009. An initially peaceful demonstration in Ürümchi against ethnic inequality and injustice, triggered by the mob killing of at least two Uyghur migrant workers in an inner Chinese toy factory, produced the worst bout of violence seen since 1949. Uyghur rioters targeted Han Chinese civilians; two days later, state forces stood back to permit a reciprocal attack on Uyghur civilians by Han vigilantes (Millward 2009; Smith Finley 2011). Between 2012 and 2015, a cycle of spontaneous retaliatory local violence erupted in response to the highly intrusive state policing of religion (Smith Finley 2019a). While most incidents during this period could not be accurately characterized as “terrorist,” they did include some 12 percent of incidents that constituted preplanned attacks on Han settlers (Rodríguez-Merino 2019). A representative example is the attack in September 2015 by a group of Uyghur men on the Sogan Colliery in Bay county, which targeted security guards, the mine owner’s residence, and a dormitory housing between three hundred and four hundred mostly Han workers (Smith Finley 2019a). There were also two apparently terrorist incidents that took place in China proper, including the 2013 suicide crash in Tian’anmen Square and the 2014 knife attack at Kunming train station, described by Chinese authorities as “China’s 9–11” (Roberts 2020). One might observe that, as in Tasmania in 1835, the indigenous peoples now “began to annoy the settlers to a degree that required some active measures from the government” (Melville, in Madley 2004: 172).

It is important to note, however, two points of difference between the situation in Xinjiang and the cases examined by Madley (2004) in respect of Phase Two. First, local reaction to colonization in Xinjiang has by and large been moderate by comparison with the “guerrilla insurgencies” faced by settlers in Tasmania, California, and Namibia. Second, the Chinese state has not (so far) embarked on a “military genocidal campaign” in response, at least, not one that has involved mass killings. Rather, there have been isolated instances of mass kill-

ing and disappearance by the state, usually in the wake of mass demonstrations that turned violent (e.g., the 1990 Baren insurrection, the 1997 Ghulja protest, the 2009 Ürümchi demonstration), and, in the case of the “Yarkand Massacre” of 2014, in response to local resistance against intrusive religious policing. In Baren, some sixteen hundred Uyghurs are said to have been killed by anti-riot troops, tanks and fighter planes (Vicizany 2003), while it is reported that after the 1997 and 2009 demonstrations, “hundreds” were extrajudicially killed or formally executed, and unknown numbers of young men “disappeared” (Amnesty International 1999; Uyghur Human Rights Project 2010).² In Yarkand, for which we have only very limited information, one thousand to three thousand Uyghurs were allegedly killed by security forces in a raid on three villages (Hoshur 2014; Tohti Arish 2019). Considered on a scale of genocidal behaviors, where genocide is understood as physical destruction, this level of mass killing might be said to constitute a “protogenocide” at the milder end of the continuum, where the Holocaust sits at the extreme end as a “hypergenocide” (Campbell 2011: 601–603).³ Arguably, then, during this second phase, we have seen neither a level

2. It is however difficult to verify exact numbers of deaths and disappearances in Xinjiang; reported numbers may be just the tip of the iceberg. During my field trip to Ghulja in 2002, local interlocutors estimated that approximately 10 per cent of the male population had been “disappeared” following the incident in 1997.

3. In his study of what he terms a “creeping genocide” perpetrated against the *jummas* of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh, Mark Levene shows how small-scale massacres occurring over a protracted period may not be recognized as “genocide” in a context where the term usually supposes a one-off large-scale event (1999: 22–24). The characteristics of the crisis in the CHT mirror the contemporary situation in Xinjiang in many respects. To name just four: 1) both Bangladesh and China see themselves as the victims (of state subversion) rather than the perpetrators of harm; 2) both states are committing genocide because they see it as being in their developmental interests to do so; 3) both hope to strengthen the state by securing a resource-rich frontier; and 4) neither state set out to exterminate a people simply on the grounds of ethnic difference but rather because of those communities’ obdurate refusal to be coerced into the national mainstream on terms determined by the state, and to relinquish hegemonic control over the land and resources which they consider to be theirs.

of indigenous resistance that might be termed an “insurgency,” nor a “military genocidal campaign” waged by the PRC; rather, the 1990s and 2000s witnessed rising local discontent at escalating ethnic inequalities, but this was more usually expressed in the form of peaceful protest. Only on three occasions did it develop into mass violence, and this generally appears to have occurred when nonviolent local protest was met with disproportionate state force. During and following the 2009 Ürümqi riots, local violence did begin to target Han civilians in addition to state agents and infrastructure; yet only occasionally could those attacks be described as premeditated, planned attacks on Han settlers, intended to frighten other civilians: in other words, as “terrorist” incidents (Rodríguez-Merino 2019; Roberts 2020). In response, the state has employed firepower and enacted disappearances on four known occasions.

The above differences notwithstanding, in 2017 the Chinese state opted to move firmly to Phase Three, “incarceration as ‘final solution.’” It did so not because a general insurgency had actually occurred (although state narratives frequently exaggerate the level of violence that did occur) but in order to ensure, preemptively, that such a general insurgency *could never emerge* in Xinjiang.⁴ In this third phase, we can observe a slow genocidal process unfolding. It builds upon the dehumanization of the Uyghur people as “terrorists” and “extremists” that began after Chinese authorities adopted the Global War on Terror (GWOT) rhetoric from the United States in 2001, and accelerated after the 2009 riots (Roberts 2020), upon the high-tech securitization of the Uyghur region since 2012 (Byler 2021), and upon the launch of the “People’s War on Terror” in 2014, operationalized and experienced as a war on Islam *per se*. The subsequent onset of “de-extremification” (Ch. *qu jiduanhua*) in 2017 has led to a tripartite system of incarceration involving mass extralegal internment, a sharp rise in formal prison sentencing, and the introduction of forced labor with the goal of turning Uyghurs and others into pacified, pro-

ductive laborers (Smith Finley 2021). Following the promulgation of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulations on De-Extremification on March 30, 2017, it is estimated that upwards of one million Turkic Muslims (mainly Uyghurs, but also Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, etc.) were extrajudicially detained in political “re-education” camps, initially known as “concentrated transformation through education centers” (Ch. *jizhong jiaoyu zhuanhua zhongxin*) and later renamed “vocational training centers” by the Chinese government (Zenz 2019). Within these camps, small-scale killings and deaths by attrition have occurred as the result of malnutrition, unsanitary conditions, withheld medical care, violence (beatings), and suicides (Smith Finley 2019b). We also have witness testimonies of the systematic torture and rape of both female and male prisoners (see Harris in Tobin et al. 2021), and of forced sterilizations, abortions, and IUD insertions (Zenz 2020).

Genocidal processes

As the Chinese state responded to international criticism and sought to place these incarcerations on a legal—rather than extralegal—footing, the period since 2019 has seen the “graduation” (to use the Chinese authorities’ term) of some—though not all—re-education camp internees to house arrest, formal incarceration (Bunin 2019), or forced labor (Xu et al. 2020; Murphy and Elimä 2021). This latter transformation of purportedly dangerous “criminal” elements into a population of docile manual workers is reminiscent of this observation from Drechsler: “The settler holds that the native has a right to exist only in so far as he is useful to the white man” ([1966] 1980). On the positive side (if it can be termed such), the fact that Uyghur labor is apparently deemed indispensable to the regional and national economy militates rather *against* a charge of physical genocide, as observed by Patrick Wolfe in considering apartheid South Africa or African American slavery (2006: 403–404). Nonetheless, I would argue that a genocidal process continues to be underway in Xinjiang, and that this can be seen as at once predatory and moralistic (Campbell 2009). On the one hand, the historical context provided in my analysis of Phase One above suggests the specter of a “frontier genocide,” involving the attempted eradication of indigenous peoples on resource-rich colonial frontiers. This is commonly understood as a predatory form of genocide: born of an act of exploitation to acquire economic wealth, it occurs in response to native

4. See Moses (2021) on the “problems of genocide,” in which he shows how the perspectives of victims and perpetrators necessarily differ. While victims think they are being attacked on the grounds of their identity (because the state is attacking all members of the group), the state attacks the whole group preemptively to achieve the (albeit illegitimate) end of “permanent security.” In so doing, the state engages in the notion of collective guilt: because it considers that some Uyghurs are politically dangerous, it must incarcerate, “re-educate,” and reduce the group as a whole.



resistance to the settler colonists' predatory behavior.⁵ On the other hand, CCP discourses around "de-extremification" are highly suggestive of a moralistic genocide—one that embodies the perpetrator's view that the victims (rather than the perpetrators) are "evil." In the context of the progressive dehumanization of Uyghurs, first as "terrorists" and "extremists," and latterly as a "virus" and "mentally ill" (Grose 2019), genocide emerges as a moralistic response to behaviors perceived and defined as "deviant." In this sense, "[genocide] occurs not when moral evaluations are disregarded by its perpetrators, but when they are present and applied" (Campbell 2009: 151). In the case of Xinjiang, Uyghurs and other indigenous peoples emerge as "immoral" in the state's eyes when they fail to recognize and accept CCP leadership and policy as "correct," thus producing an internal threat to Party authority. In further consequence, their perceived "disloyalty" then renders the northwest frontier, long considered a sensitive buffer zone, fragile and a potential threat to permanent security.

An ethnography of *tabula rasa* in "re-educated" Xinjiang

As these genocidal processes have gathered pace in the Uyghur region, the concept of *tabula rasa* (or "a map scraped clean") that once motivated German settler ambitions in Namibia has begun to reverberate in this contemporary colonial context. In Namibia, colonists saw the indigenous Herero as essentially "less human" than German settlers, as *Unmenschen* (nonhumans) that must be destroyed. They argued that they had a "minimal moral claim" to the land and must be removed (Madley 2004: 168; Hull 2005). The German army then proceeded to enact policies of *tabula rasa* in order to facilitate the dispossession and ethnic cleansing of local peoples. Later, it would use concentration camps to intern prisoners of its genocidal wars against the Herero and the Nama. The mass deaths that occurred there are described by Kreienbaum as "an unintended consequence of the plan to exploit the labour of the prisoners and to satisfy the colonizers' demands for security"

(2019: 187).⁶ Hull (2005), on the other hand, argues that the violence directed by the German military against its enemies went far beyond that which was necessary for "security," or for political goals. In her study of the "absolute exploitation" and "absolute destruction" pursued in German Southwest Africa, she shows how "the repeated and unlimited application" of violence against the Herero was the result of "institutional extremism," namely, the absence of the possibility of intervention from outside the military, whether by civilian government or public opinion (Hull 2005: 2). In the post-1908 period following the genocidal campaign, the *Landespolizei* (territory police) were responsible for, among other things, "educative violence," which meant corrective discipline to ensure workers kept working (Muschalek 2019: 132). Here, corporal punishment was justified by racist views of Africans as inherently lazy, enabling the police to exercise a form of "civilized" violence as part of their "paternal right of chastisement" in the colony (Muschalek 2019: 137).

In Xinjiang, a turn towards *tabula rasa* has been increasingly observable in state discourses and policies since the 2010 Xinjiang Work Forum held following the 2009 Ürümqi riots. Not a single Uyghur scholar or cadre was invited to attend and contribute to that Forum; Uyghurs were completely invisibilized and absented from the policy-making process, a move suggestive of a breakdown in trust and the state's growing inability to see Uyghurs as human beings. Invisibilization was equally glaring in a 2012 advertising campaign on the Beijing subway, which encouraged Han Chinese in the crowded east to make their home in the invitingly "empty" northwest. Colorful posters portrayed Xinjiang—and particularly the southwest corner of Khotān, long dominated by Uyghurs—as *terra nullius*, or "virgin land" ready for the taking. Interested parties need only ring the telephone number provided in small print in the bottom right corner for the local branch of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (see Figure 1). These images of an almost entirely empty landscape recalled earlier images used on album covers and in music VCDs produced by Mando-pop singer Dao Lang, a Sichuanese

5. See also Caskey and Murtazashvili (2021), who suggest a model of predatory-state capitalism under Xi Jinping's centralized state to explain China's recent violent assimilationist policies in Xinjiang.

6. For Kreienbaum, the concentration camps in German/Southwest Africa should be sharply distinguished from the National Socialist extermination camps of Nazi Germany, although he concedes that similarities between them did exist at specific points in time, namely, when the latter yet remained a site devoted to the exploitation of the internees' labor (Kreienbaum 2019: 231).





Figure 1: “Scroll of time and space: the oasis of Khotän,” advertising campaign on Beijing subway, 2012. Photo credit: David Tobin.

native who made his home in Xinjiang for some years but left following the 2009 unrest. In Figure 2 below, Dao Lang appears in a representative image that portrays him as a lone Han settler against a vast, empty desert backdrop.⁷

Prior to 2014 and the launch of the CCP’s “People’s War on Terror,” one might state that development and settlement of China’s north-western province had continued in spite of the presence of local peoples. I would suggest that this position substantively changed after 2014 and the switch to the policy of “long-term control and permanent order,” operationalized via the “de-extremification” campaign from 2017. Now, it seemed, local Turkic Muslims and their linguistic, cultural and religious traces must be “scraped clean” from the regional map, beginning with the mass incarceration of the “untrustworthy,” cast as “extremists,” “terrorists,” “separa-

tists,” “rats,” “parasites,” “mentally ill,” and a “virus.” The need to “correct” the perceived “deviance” of the local peoples is plainly evident in the text of the 2017 XUAR Regulations on De-Extremification (Mahmut and Smith Finley 2022); but how to correct? Unlike in Namibia, where eradication was attempted first through a genocidal military campaign (i.e., mass killings) and then through death-by-attrition in camps and reservations, in Xinjiang *tabula rasa* would be achieved through a modern, high-tech, slow and arguably more painful process of incarceration plus coercive thought transformation, a process David Tobin likens to “social death.” Drawing on Claudia Card’s work, he writes: “Physical death is not necessarily worse than ‘intolerable harms’ of language loss, trauma, and disconnection from community, therefore mass killings are inessential to deprive groups of vitality and reproductive capacities” (2022: 97).⁸

7. I have argued elsewhere that Dao Lang’s settlement in Xinjiang, as well as his predatory practices of musical fusion and his expressed attitudes (both within and without his songs), symbolize Han colonial domination. The artist was previously lauded by PRC authorities as a model of the inherently “mixed/fused” ethnic make-up of the region, and a symbol of the eventual cultural assimilation the state so desires to see (Smith Finley 2015).

8. If the state’s end goal were simply linguistic eradication, the situation of the Celtic languages in Great Britain might make an appropriate comparison (see Price 1984). However, PRC state policies of “a map scraped clean” go far beyond linguisticism. The process of “hollowing out,” of “eradicating and replacing,” involves not only the Uyghur tongue but also Uyghur minds and ultimately Uyghur bodies, as I will show below.



Figure 2: Sichuan-born musician Dao Lang: one man and his guitar in the Northwest borderlands.

Returning from a three-week ethnographic field trip to Xinjiang (Ürümchi and Kashgar) in June and July 2018, during which I documented the systematic, state-sanctioned destruction of Uyghur linguistic, cultural, and religious norms and practices, I felt compelled to reread George Orwell's *Nineteen eighty-four* (1949). In the final passages of that masterpiece were chilling echoes of what I had witnessed in Xinjiang, expressed in the words of O'Brien, Winston Smith's captor at the Ministry of Love:

Shall I tell you why we have brought you here? To cure you! To make you sane! Will you understand, Winston, that no one whom we bring to this place ever leaves our hands uncured? . . . *We do not merely destroy our enemies, we change them.*

We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us: *so long as he resists us we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him.*

We shall crush you down to the point from where there is no coming back . . . Everything will be dead inside you . . . You will be hollow. *We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves.* (Orwell 1949: 265–69, my emphases)

O'Brien's goal of "hollowing out" or "squeezing empty" the human heart and mind immediately calls forth the notion of *tabula rasa*—if you like, "scraping the mind-

map clean." But, in practice, social engineering—the process of "eradicating and replacing"—is being conducted not just in Uyghur minds but on Uyghur bodies, within Uyghur families, across every inch of Uyghur society, and across the physical landscape of the Uyghur region (Tobin et al. 2021).

To start with linguistic destruction: in June 2018 I found the Uyghur script (a modified Arabic script) cut out from a textile poster hung before the Ürümchi No.1 primary school, as if it were a cancer (see Figure 3). In a context where the earlier policy of "bilingual education" (Ch. *shuangyu jiaoyu*) has been rapidly replaced since 2017 by a "national language education" (Ch. *guoyu jiaoyu*) policy, meaning Chinese-only education, the Uyghur script's associations with Arab culture and Islam are seen as deviant. Yet the state also recognizes the need to temporarily retain that script as it seeks to coercively transition primary school-aged Uyghur children to a Han majoritarian identity. In a set of six Uyghur-medium primary level textbooks I purchased from the Xinhua bookstore in Ürümchi in 2018, *tabula rasa* is again in evidence. To be sure, the books are still produced in the Uyghur script. Yet in terms of their content, they have been stripped of almost all characteristics suggestive of a distinct Uyghur identity. Throughout, Han cultural and social life (Confucian, secular) is



Figure 3: Uyghur script cut out from a textile poster hung before the Ürümqi No.1 primary school. Photo credit: Joanne Smith Finley, June 2018.

highlighted, while Uyghur cultural and social life (Turkic, Islamic) is almost absent. The human characters in the books' illustrations show only Han facial features and cultural dress, while Uyghur features and cultural dress are absent. The human characters who appear in the readings are Han Chinese, with typical Chinese personal names, but Uyghur personal names are largely absent. Texts about animals and nature depict inner and coastal Chinese physical geography and ecology, while those native to the Xinjiang region are largely absent. Han Chinese and foreign/Western literatures are highlighted (but noticeably not Turkish or Middle Eastern literatures), while Uyghur literature and folklore are largely absent. Folk stories are mostly selected from Han Chinese sources, but the abundance of available Uyghur folk stories are absent. And finally, all selected poems are by Han Chinese authors (and translated into Uyghur), with much-loved works by Uyghur poets absent (Mahmut and Smith Finley 2022).

During that same field trip in 2018, I found Han Chinese traditions—New Year rhyming couplets and red lanterns—imposed on Uyghur homes in Kashgar Old Town, in a context where everyday Islamic traditions, perceived and represented as dangerously “extremist,” had been outlawed. Many homes were padlocked and

abandoned, suggesting that their occupants may have been detained (Smith Finley, in Tobin et al. 2021). Local people told me—quietly—that “there are no Islamic festivals in Xinjiang anymore,” pointing to propaganda posters that advocate the cultural transmission of majority Han traditions and virtues (see Figure 4).

In another example of elimination and replacement (see Wolfe 2006), Timothy Grose has documented how the CCP has sought to uproot Uyghur cultural configurations of order in the family home and replace them with Han domestic sensibilities via the “Three News” housing campaign (Grose 2021).

“Hollowing out” has similarly occurred in mosques and shrines in the Uyghur region (Smith Finley, in Tobin et al. 2021). In summer 2018, city mosques in Ürümqi were emptied of worshippers while neighborhood mosques in Kashgar Old Town were padlocked, razor-wired, and adorned with PRC flags, “Love the Party, Love the Country” (Ch. *aidang aiguo*) slogans,⁹ and framed posters detailing the 2017 XUAR Regulations on De-Extremification and the growing list of “illegal religious

9. Compare the earlier slogan “Love the Country, Love Religion” (*aiguo aijiao*), circulating during a period when religious adherence was still permitted within limits.



Figure 4: Propaganda poster, Ürümchi: “Respect traditional [Han] festivals; hand down beautiful Chinese virtues.” Photo credit: Joanne Smith Finley, July 2018.

activities” (see Figure 5). At some mosques, the crescents and/or domes had been removed, while one had been turned into a café bar at the service of Han tourists (see Figure 6). My visit to the Büwi Märyäm shrine in rural Bāshkirem in Kashgar prefecture revealed a similar picture: the shrine was deserted and padlocked, and its garden devoid of votive offerings (see Figures 7 and 8). Since I undertook my final field trip to the Uyghur region in 2018, it has further emerged that some mosques and shrines in the Uyghur region have been wholly or partially destroyed (Thum 2020).

Meanwhile, a “beautification” (Ch. *lianghua*) project was underway in Ürümchi’s Uyghur-dominated Tian-shan district in 2018. Carried out entirely by Han Chinese construction workers, it erased the ethnically distinct architecture and all previous traces of authentic Uyghur, Turkish, and Central Asian influences, replacing them with a generic faux-Islamic facade (see Figure 9).

From “qualified genocide” to genocide in law

The above examples would traditionally be placed within a special, somehow lesser category of qualified genocide such as “cultural genocide” (Levene 1999; Wolfe 2006). And, as Wolfe observed: “The apparently insurmount-

able problem with the qualified genocides is that, in their very defensiveness, they threaten to undo themselves. They are never quite the real thing” (2006: 402). The restrictive equation of genocide with time-intensive direct *physical* violence is, however, periodically challenged, as seen in Levene’s (1999) treatment of “creeping genocide” in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, in Tobin’s emphasis on genocide as “social death by attrition” (2022) and in Wakeham’s recent call for cross-pollination between studies of “genocide by attrition” and settler colonial genocide (2021).

Meanwhile, other forms of state violence in contemporary Xinjiang have been visited on Uyghur bodies, and as such invoke associations with physical or biological (as opposed to cultural, social, or psychological) destruction. This assault began around 2012, when Uyghur males in the south (the cultural heartland) were forced to shave their beards, while females were made to remove headscarves and veils and shun modest clothing. These restrictions, which robbed Uyghur men of their masculinity and prevented women from observing purdah (Uy. *namāhrām*), then made their way north and were eventually deployed in the regional capital Ürümchi too. More chillingly, recent research based on PRC open-source documents, Chinese-language



Figure 5: Padlocked, razor-wired neighborhood mosque, Kashgar Old Town. Photo credit: Joanne Smith Finley, July 2018.



Figure 6: “The Dream of Kashgar”: Neighborhood mosque converted to café bar, Kashgar Old Town. Photo credit: Joanne Smith Finley, July 2018.



Figure 7: The padlocked, empty Büwi Märyäm Mazari, Bāshkirem, Kashgar prefecture. Photo credit: Joanne Smith Finley, July 2018.



Figure 8: Garden of Büwi Märyäm Mazari, Bāshkirem, Kashgar prefecture, devoid of votive offerings. Photo credit: Joanne Smith Finley, July 2018.



Figure 9: “Beautification” project: erasing ethnically distinct architecture in Ürümqi’s Tianshan district. Photo credit: Joanne Smith Finley, July 2018.

scholarship, and a comprehensive set of leaked CCP government papers has demonstrated that Uyghur women have since 2016 been subjected to forced abortions and coercive IUD insertions and sterilizations as part of a euphemistically named “population optimization” program (Zenz 2020, 2021; Ruser and Leibold 2021). Such policies were subsequently shown to have been endorsed by China’s top leadership.¹⁰

This particular development, taking place within the broader context of ethnically targeted erasures I have de-

scribed above (or, to use Wolfe’s term, “eliminations”), recently led a People’s Tribunal in London, chaired by leading UK judge Sir Geoffrey Nice, to find that the PRC has committed genocide against the Uyghurs under Article 2(d) of the 1948 UN Genocide Convention (imposing measures intended to prevent births). In Paragraph 177 of its judgment (published on December 9, 2021 in summary form), the Tribunal concluded that

... the PRC has put in place a comprehensive system of measures to “optimise” the population in Xinjiang with a particular focus on the southern region which is majority Uyghur populated ... These policies will result in significantly fewer births in years to come than might otherwise have occurred. The population of Uyghurs in future generations will be smaller than it would have been without these policies. This will result in a partial destruction of the Uyghurs.¹¹

It goes on to note that it is satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that imposing measures to prevent Uyghur

10. The full set of eleven documents from The Xinjiang Papers, which were leaked to the Uyghur Tribunal in September 2021, is published online as Chinese-language transcripts here: <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-Xinjiang-Papers-An-Introduction-1.pdf>.

For more information about these leaked PRC government documents, see David Tobin’s analysis here: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/peering-chinas-decision-making-what-are-xinjiang-papers>. For further analysis of the repressive architecture of Xinjiang’s governance, see Xu, Leibold, and Impiombato (2021).

11. <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Uyghur-Tribunal-Summary-Judgment-9th-Dec-21.pdf>, p. 53.



births matched the revealed intention of the PRC leadership's policies to reduce the Uyghur population and thereby destroy it to an extent, as explained at paragraphs 79–96, and that this intention had evolved into plans at every level of regional, local, and community government. Finally, in paragraph 189, the Tribunal confirms that for purposes of the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, “the ‘unborn’ part of the Uyghur ethnicity of Xinjiang—calculated by consideration of the likely numbers of Uyghurs in years to come measured against the likely number of Uyghurs there would have been had the Uyghurs not been treated in the way they were by measures to prevent births—constitutes a ‘substantial part.’”¹²

Conclusions

Since 2014, and accelerating since 2017, a holistic strategy of ethnic cleansing—creating *tabula rasa*, “a map scraped clean”—has been deployed on China’s northwest frontier. This genocidal process, which Chinese authorities gloss as “de-radicalization” or securing Xinjiang against “untrustworthy” Uyghurs, has in practice come to target the entire Uyghur ethnic group, perceived as an existential and biological threat to the Chinese state and an inconvenient presence in the context of Xi Jinping’s New-Era (Ch. *xin shidai*) development plans to expand west via the Belt and Road Initiative (Smith Finley 2019b; Roberts 2020). In this time of “re-education,” coercive thought transformation, both within Xinjiang’s vast network of internment camps and in the open-air prison without them, serves as one arm of a “final solution” to erase the Uyghurs’ linguistic, cultural, and religious identity, perceived as the dangerous lifeforce of the (potentially separate) Uyghur nation. This act on its own would meet the definition of genocide when viewed in the broader sense espoused by Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin, as the “destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups (language, culture, religion; economic institutions, etc.), with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves” (Lemkin 1944). However, as a “qualified genocide” (i.e., cultural genocide), it stops short of fulfilling the international legal definition of

genocide as physical destruction, as outlined in the UN Convention and conventionally practiced by the bar. However, new evidence of birth prevention strategies deployed against the Uyghurs by the PRC and of their predicted present and future consequences with regard to Uyghur population size, confirms that the CCP leadership has committed *biological* genocide on its northwest frontier with a view to destroying a substantial part of the Uyghur group, as such.

Benjamin Madley, writing in 2004 about historical examples of frontier genocide, noted that in the third and final phase, “perpetrators create a myth to excuse their crimes . . . ‘primitive’ peoples and cultures are fated to vanish . . . the extinction of indigenous peoples is inevitable” (Madley 2004: 168). This notion has long been asserted in Han majoritarian discourses in the PRC; however, while the so-called first-generation minority policies anticipated that this vanishing would happen “naturally” in the course of modernization, the second-generation minority policies popularized after 2011 seek to hasten that process through “ethnic fusion” (Tobin 2022). In the Uyghurs’ case, this now amounts to a lethal combination of coercive Sinicization and planned, demographic destruction. A core criticism of genocide—the “crime of crimes”—is that the label has usually been applied retroactively and too late to halt bloodshed, though it could still be used to pursue accountability. This changed in January 2020, when Philippe Sands QC represented The Gambia against Myanmar, with the result that the International Court of Justice [ICJ] ordered measures to protect the Rohingyas from further violence under the 1948 UN Genocide Convention (Vock 2020). As noted by the Uyghur Tribunal in Paragraph 201 of its summary judgment, it is “unfortunate that no efforts have been made by those [countries whose parliaments found the PRC to be committing genocide in Xinjiang] or other countries to have the issue dealt with at the ICJ, as might happen if a country had the courage to take the matter there.”¹³ It remains to be seen, in the light of the recent judgment, which of the 152 signatories to the 1948 UN Genocide Convention will take up the mantle from The Gambia in respect of holding the PRC to account for ongoing crimes against humanity committed in Xinjiang.

12. <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Uyghur-Tribunal-Summary-Judgment-9th-Dec-21.pdf>, pp. 55–56.

13. <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Uyghur-Tribunal-Summary-Judgment-9th-Dec-21.pdf>, p. 58.



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