(IDENTITY) POLITICS IN COMMAND: XI JINPING IN XINJIANG

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Xi Jinping, the paramount leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC), toured eastern Xinjiang on a four-day 'investigative tour' 考察调研 in mid-July — his first visit to the Uyghur region since 2014. On the surface, the trip and its public messaging do not appear to differ much from those of previous general secretaries of the Communist Party of China (CPC) during their visits to Xinjiang. Flanked by Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region party secretary Ma Xingrui 马兴瑞, Xinjiang governor Erkin Tuniyaz, and other officials, Xi took in cultural, economic, and tourist sights, stopped off at a village, reviewed the military, and sat as a guest in a Uyghur home. He engaged in 'informal chats' with common folk, like the Bingtuan (aka Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps or XPCC, 新疆生产建设兵团) farmer who just happened to be working in a cotton field when Xi showed up. Xi spoke of Xinjiang's fantastic development, stability, progress, and prosperity, and of its core position on the Silk Road Economic Belt. And he repeated the mantra that 'since ancient times, Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of our country'.

In that way, then, the official *Xinhua* images and reporting of Xi's remarks at various venues project an air of normalcy.[1] But the situation is not normal. Starting in 2017, central CPC policy directives led, at the height of the campaign in 2019, to the extralegal internment in camps of one to two million people based on dubious allegations of 'extremism',[2] and another half-million wrongfully imprisoned after processing through the judicial system.[3] In this mass roundup, a huge swathe of the academic, cultural, and political elites of Uyghur society were 'disappeared'. Meanwhile, Xinjiang cities have been excruciatingly securitised through high and low-tech means. Thousands of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other non-Han Xinjiang people abroad have been threatened and forced to seek asylum in democratic countries.[4] The United States, Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and other states and international organisations have issued denunciations and findings of genocide and have slapped economic sanctions and import bans on Xinjiang individuals and entities. These entities include the Bingtuan, which is a massive state–corporate conglomerate, principal implementer of colonial policies, and serves as the third arm of control in Xinjiang (after the party and regional government). President Xi's Xinjiang policies, while not

the only reason for the precipitous decline in Sino-US and Sino-European relations during Xi's tenure, are a leading contributor to that crisis and to plummeting international esteem for China generally.

The projection of a business-as-usual atmosphere stands out for what is not said. Xi's visit to Xinjiang University would have been poignant, for example, for those who know that its former president, Tashpolat Tiyip, is reported to have been sentenced to death as a 'two-faced official' (a political label meaning, in effect, insufficiently loyal non-Han cadre), or that the internationally renowned Professor Rahile Dawut was taken by state authorities in late 2017 with no news of her whereabouts since. The sense of strained normality is all the more salient when one considers what is missing from *Xinhua*'s account of Xi's remarks: in contrast with other official statements regarding Xinjiang over the past five years, in July, Xi did not mention terrorism, extremism, or separatism, or refer to the so-called vocational training centres (internment camps) that were the central feature of his policies.[5] Nor did he mention the labour transfer program that has displaced hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs, especially from the predominantly Uyghur south, from camps or villages into forced labour in factories in Xinjiang or across the PRC. Though implemented in the name of 'poverty alleviation', this proletarianisation of rural Uyghurs is breaking up families, keeping them from more lucrative entrepreneurial opportunities, and removing them from lands where they have lived for centuries.

The closest Xi came to acknowledging the elephant in the room — at least in the official account of the trip — was during a visit to the Eighth Division of the Bingtuan, in Shihezi, in northern Xinjiang. There, in praising the Bingtuan's contributions to stability through 'garrisoning the frontier' (Xi uses both the modern 安边固疆 and the historical 戍边), Xi was dog-whistling: due to its problematic past and costly overheads, the Bingtuan was disbanded after the Cultural Revolution, only to be re-established in 1981 due to the PRC's fear of Islamic movements. Everyone involved with the Bingtuan knows that despite its heroic self-image, it does not defend the PRC's border (the People's Liberation Army does that). Rather, protecting the 'frontier' means hedging against domestic unrest from Xinjiang's non-Han indigenous peoples.

The Bingtuan was formed when the victorious CPC settled 80,000 Kuomintang 国民党 soldiers in Xinjiang in 1949. It acquires and occupies land, promotes Han in-migration by offering land, and runs prisons and internment camps, including many of those built in the past few years. Bingtuan state farms and factories grow, purchase, and process much of Xinjiang's cotton, which makes up 80 percent of China's total cotton production. Because of its close involvement in repression and forced labour, the Bingtuan is now subject to international sanctions — throwing the global fibre, textile, and garment trade into confusion as fashion brands are forced to rethink their supply options.[6] Xi's call for the Bingtuan to 'adapt to new conditions and demands' 兵团要适应新形势新要求[7] is perhaps a reference to this recent global attention and the ban on imports of Bingtuan products to the United States.[8] Overall, however, by reiterating praise and support for the Bingtuan and its unspecified but well-known role in bolstering colonial occupation, Xi doubled down on his policy trajectory of the past several years.

Not Just Folk: Shifting Definitions of *Minzu*

The rhetorical messages of Xi's 2022 Xinjiang trip differ from those of past leaders in another way — one as significant as it is subtle. To appreciate the shift requires understanding some history of how the CPC has talked about non-Han peoples in the PRC. (While amounting to less than 10 percent of the total population, China's non-Han groups collectively, as a country, would be the ninth or tenth most populous in the world — about the size of Russia. So, they are not numerically insignificant.) Since the 1950s, the PRC has officially recognised fifty-five 'minority' groups in addition to Han Chinese.[9] All these groups, including the Han, are labelled *minzu* 民族, which is a neologism coined in Japan in the late nineteenth century to mean 'folk' or 'nation'. The PRC first used *minzu* to translate the Russian *natsional'nost'* and mimicked the Soviet parlance to define China's demographic and cultural diversity in terms of 'nationality' and the PRC as a multinational nation-state. Since the 1990s, however, official Chinese rhetoric has shed the Soviet model to discuss diversity in terms more like those used in Europe

***Zhonghua* is a complex, shifting signifier**
Source: tian yake, Flickr

and the United States. For example, what had been translated as the State Nationalities Affairs Commission 中华人民共和国国家民族事务委员会 changed its official English name to the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, while retaining the original terminology in Chinese, and still applying *minzu* even to ancient groups whom many Western historians and anthropologists would call neither a nation nor an ethnic group. Because this mutability of the term is doing a lot of ideological heavy lifting, I leave it in Chinese, as *minzu*, below.

Similarly, the ideologically central keyword *Zhonghua* 中华 is a complex, shifting signifier. Its first use as a general transhistorical term for 'Chinese' in a national sense is credited to Liang Qichao 梁启超, who sought a Chinese-language equivalent to Western words for 'Chinese'. Liang meant *Zhonghua* roughly in the sense we use the word 'Han' today, but in early twentieth-century discourse about the territorial and demographic makeup of the Chinese nation, politicians in the Republic of China (1912–1949), while promoting their territorial claims over Tibet, Mongolia, and Xinjiang, extended *Zhonghua* to include peoples from these other parts of the former Qing empire (who, like Chinese in the PRC, declared independence from China on the fall of the Qing or in subsequent decades). Both Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 and Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 pushed strained racial or historical arguments that Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongols, and Manchus were all originally Chinese but had diverged from their Chinese roots over time. The PRC initially dropped such pan–*Zhonghua*-ist assertions and, after acquiring Tibet and Xinjiang, accommodated its imperial diversity through the fifty-six–*minzu* system. But in 1989, sociologist Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 wrote an influential article that re-established the idea of *Zhonghua* as a kind of super-*minzu*.[10] Fei's formula, called the 'many origins/one entity pattern of the *Zhonghua* nation' 中华民族多元一体格局, retained distinct identities for the fifty-five non-Han *minzu*,[11]

but superimposed a *Zhonghua minzu* on top of them as the culmination of modern nation-building and national self-awareness processes: *Zhonghua* was a *national* identity that emerged after the Opium Wars.[12]

Zhonghua Rules

Minzu, then, became a fundamental building-block of the PRC's identity and governance. Since 1949, the PRC's public presentation of its 'minority *minzu*' 少数民族 — that is, those other than Han — has always showcased their cultures, albeit usually only their superficial, non-religious, and unthreatening aspects, and famously through kitschy-costumed song-and-dance performance. Han, as audience and monochrome counterpoint to these displays, were implicitly the more advanced Self, juxtaposed against the colourful *minzu* Other.[13]

True to form, when visiting the Xinjiang Regional Museum in July, Xi Jinping watched costumed performers of the *Manas*, the Kyrgyz oral epic about the heroic deeds of medieval khans. But more than his predecessors, who might be said to have been simply ticking an obligatory box by observing such *minzu* cultural displays, Xi and those helping craft his ideology are now mobilising culture and identity in Xinjiang for a specific strategic purpose — one intrinsic to Xi's broader ideological program of 'Chinese civilisation' (using *Zhonghua*, the cultural term, not *Zhongguo*, the political one). Xi's penchant for ancient Chinese phrases, affection for Confucian sentiments, and sunnier assessment of pre-nineteenth-century China (its 'feudalism' 封建 notwithstanding) have been widely noted in the context of his Chinese Dream 中国梦 slogan. Xi's ideology rolls up Xinjiang's peoples into this Chinese Dream and not, as in the past, merely as less-developed, junior siblings of the Han. A 1981 central CPC Xinjiang work group launched the catchphrase 'Han are inseparable from minority *minzu*, and minority *minzu* are inseparable from the Han' 汉族离不开少数民族，少数民族离不开汉族. Party general secretary Jiang Zemin later added that the minority nationalities were also inseparable from one another 各少数民族之间也相互离不开, resulting in the Three Inseparables 三个离不开 formula.[14]

Xi Jinping on a billboard in Xinjiang
Source: Carsten ten Brink, Flickr

In contrast with the former paternalistic apposition of Han to the less-developed 'minorities', Xi's published remarks from the Xinjiang trip — dense as they are with ideological rhetoric — do not use the character for 'Han', 汉, once. Xi does not discuss the relationship of *Hanzu* 汉族 to non-Han 'minority *minzu*' at all. Instead, we get '*Zhonghua*' twenty-eight times. The central tension in the Uyghur 'Autonomous Region' arises from heteronomous control by the Han-dominated party-state, which is promoting Han colonial settlement, offering Han special access to jobs unavailable to Uyghurs and other local peoples, letting Han pass freely through checkpoints while subjecting non-Han to mobile phone scans and physical searches, criminalising Islamic practices but not Han customs, progressively illegalising Uyghur language in favour of Mandarin — and on and on. Though they would not describe it in these terms, anyone in Xinjiang knows Uyghurs and other non-Han groups are treated very differently from the Han, just as whites and blacks all knew the score in the Jim Crow American South. But, despite the stark colonial divide between Han and non-Han, or rather, because of it, Xi's ideology attempts to erase the opposition between Han and 'minority *minzu*', in favour of big-tent inclusivity under the newly emphasised rubric of *Zhonghua*.

This core ideological message resonates in Xi's remarks at the Xinjiang Regional Museum in Ürümqi, and in his speech to cadres from the Xinjiang party, government, and the Bingtuan. After inspecting an exhibition of 'Xinjiang historical artefacts' and viewing the *Manas* performance, Xi proclaimed:

> *Zhonghua* civilisation is broad and deep, with ancient origins and a long history, and formed from the confluence of the hundred rivers of each *minzu*'s excellent culture.[15] We must strengthen research into the history of the *Zhonghua minzu* community, and the many origins/one entity pattern of the *Zhonghua minzu*.
>
> 中华文明博大精深、源远流长，是由各民族优秀文化百川汇流而成．要加强中华民族共同体历史、中华民族多元一体格局的研究．

And:

> Each *minzu* of Xinjiang is an important member of the great family of the *Zhonghua minzu*, with whom its bloodlines are linked and destiny is shared.
>
> 新疆各民族是中华民族大家庭血脉相连、命运与共的重要成员．

When instructing the cadres, Xi emphasised culture and history, deploying the new array of party-line catchphrases and stressing the notion of a common *Zhonghua* identity:

> We must firmly forge consciousness of the *Zhonghua minzu* community, promote the communication, exchange and intermingling of all *minzu*. *Zhonghua* civilisation is the site of the root vein of the culture of every Xinjiang *minzu*. We must educate and lead the many cadres and broad masses to correctly understand Xinjiang history, especially the history of each *minzu*'s development. We must cultivate a *Zhonghua minzu* historical outlook, firmly forge a China heart and Chinese soul. We must, in particular, thoroughly promote the 'foundation building' project for the youth, and construct a shared spiritual garden of the *Zhonghua minzu*.

> 要铸牢中华民族共同体意识，促进各民族交往交流交融．中华文明是新疆各民族文化的根脉所在．要教育引导广大干部群众正确认识新疆历史特别是民族发展史，树牢中华民族历史观，铸牢中国心、中华魂，特别是要深入推进青少年‘筑基’工程，构筑中华民族共有精神家园.[16]

Cadres would have immediately understood what Xi was referring to by ‘correctly understand Xinjiang’s history’ and the ‘cultivation of a *Zhonghua minzu* historical outlook’. In 2016, at the onset of the current period of extreme repression, a group of Uyghur writers, editors, and publishers was arrested and convicted of separatism[17] for the crime of publishing a set of (state-approved) Uyghur-language and culture textbooks[18] that Xi’s regime decided gave too much autonomous stature to Uyghur history and culture.[19] A new ‘summary’ 纪要 of historical points, determined by the Central Work Coordination Small Group on Xinjiang, was circulated within the party from 2017.[20] Like other recent pronouncements on ethnic diversity in Chinese history, the summary dates the ‘unification’ of tribes and confederations with the proto-Han (Huaxia 华夏) as early as the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han (202 BCE – 202 CE) empires, then skips rapidly ahead to the twentieth century.[21] If, as the new approach argues, *Zhonghua*-ness began so early, subsequent developments, such as the 1,000 years between the eighth and eighteenth centuries when no China-based state occupied or had influence in the region now called Xinjiang, do not matter. Xi can then assert that all peoples in today’s PRC have been part of the *Zhonghua* collective for millennia. This logic, which is central to Xi’s historical strategy, depends on the generic, ahistorical sense of *Zhonghua*. But, unlike Fei Xiaotong’s use of the word, it does not treat the emergence of *Zhonghua* identity as a modern phenomenon, instead, rolling it back to the very beginnings of the Chinese-language historical record.

This *Zhonghua*-centric historical catechism undergirds Xi’s central ideological program for non-Han peoples — namely, the Five Identifications 五个认同: identification with the great homeland 伟大祖国, with the *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族, with *Zhonghua* culture 中华文化, with the CPC 中国共产党, and with Socialism with Chinese Characteristics 中国特色社会主义.[22] Focusing on affiliative identity — specifically Chineseness — in this way, without

reference to economic base or class status, is not particularly Marxist, and even departs from Stalin's definition of a nation (with its common-language criterion), on which the early PRC attempted to base its *minzu* policies.[23] But that is just what Xi ordered at the Second Central Work Forum on Xinjiang in 2014 when he raised the issue of ethnic and religious identity above economic diagnoses of the Xinjiang problem; previously, development had been treated as both a fundamental cause of and the ultimate solution to unrest.[24] This new focus on the psychological (or 'spiritual') rather than the 'material' led to the massive effort to re-engineer the identity of millions of non-Han *minzu* in Xinjiang by subjecting them to psychological and physical maltreatment in prison camps. (Many journalistic accounts group all the non-Han *minzu* of Xinjiang, including the Uyghurs, under the term 'Muslim minorities'. Many members of these groups are Muslim, or culturally Muslim, but those who are not practising are also persecuted. They are persecuted for ethnonational, not religious, reasons, though religious extremism is used as the excuse. Secular Uyghur elites were the first to go. The state has also put Mongol *minzu* in Xinjiang under pressure, though they are not Muslim.)

In July 2022, Xi called on Xinjiang officials to stay the course, explaining that cultural identity is the deepest layer of identity, and enjoined them to:

> Correct historical and cultural recognition and highlight the special characteristics of *Zhonghua* culture and the visual image of the *Zhonghua* peoples. We must, in a multifaceted and wholistic way, construct and promulgate the commonality of *Zhonghua* culture, and [construct and promulgate] a discursive system and effective media for conveying the historical fact of pan-*minzu* communication, exchange and intermingling from Xinjiang to central China.
>
> 文化认同是最深层次的认同．要端正历史文化认知，突出中华文化特征和中华民族视觉形象．要多角度全方位构建展现中华文化共同性、新疆同内地各民族交往交流交融历史事实的话语体系和有效载体.[25]

The vocabulary here is remarkable: Xi is explicitly calling for a discourse to be constructed and for a particular visual image of *Zhonghua*-ness to be promoted — an image that includes Xinjiang's non-Han people as part of the

Zhonghua minzu community since ancient times. In short, Xi repeats the CPC claim — now a few years old — that Uyghurs (and other non-Han Xinjiang natives) have always been *Zhonghua* people. Note that the term used is not *Zhongguo ren* 中国人, citizens of the political state of China; such a claim would be still more demonstrably untrue, since for 1,000 years before 1759 no state based in geographical China had control over what is now Xinjiang. But by means of the vaguer cultural identifier *Zhonghua*, it is easier (if still inaccurate) to claim perduring connection and even identity of Central Asians with Sinitic peoples. Following a 2019 White Paper, Ürümqi's mayor and deputy party chief Yasheng Sidike published an op-ed in the *Ürümqi Evening Post* in which he went so far as to assert that Uyghurs were not related to the Turks of the Turkic Khaghanate but were 'part of the Chinese nation'.[26]

That claim is not supported by history, linguistics, or genetics. After the breakup of the Turkic Khaghanate in the mid-eighth century, the medieval Uyghur tribal confederation controlled what is now Mongolia. One hundred years later, they migrated to Gansu and the eastern part of what is now Xinjiang. Modern Uyghur language developed from old Turkic, as attested by eighth-century inscriptions found in Mongolia, and more recently, from the Central Asian Turkic literary language of Chaghatai, and was enriched by many Persian loanwords. Most modern Uyghur vocabulary, such as words for 'automobile' (*mashina*) and 'communism' (*kommunizm*), was borrowed from Russian, rather than Chinese — the legacy of tsarist and Soviet influence in Xinjiang in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Uyghur population is genetically diverse, reflecting movements of peoples and cultural exchanges from across Eurasia since before the Bronze Age.

Xi's revision of Xinjiang history is not just for internal consumption. Foreign hearts and minds are not to be neglected either. Xi ordered officials to:

> Launch multilevel, omnidirectional, three-dimensional propaganda about Xinjiang directed abroad, perfect the work of 'inviting in' [bringing selected groups on Xinjiang propaganda tours], and tell the Chinese Xinjiang story well.

> 要多层次、全方位、立体式开展涉疆对外宣传，完善‘请进来’工作，讲好中国新疆故事.[27]

In sum, while Xi's July Xinjiang tour in some ways resembled those of his predecessors, the ideological focus of the remarks he made there was on a new message — one promoting a historical narrative of primordial *Zhonghua*-ness in which Uyghurs, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and other indigenes of Xinjiang were a component from the beginning. This is an aggressively inclusive narrative that minimises non-Han ethnic identity not through exclusion, but by engulfing it within a larger invented category. Xi's *Zhonghua*-ism has, in effect, weaponised the imagined community for colonial purposes, complete with shared history, shared land, and shared blood flowing through 'root veins'.

Hats Off

Finally, the photos. The set of images accompanying reports on Xi's Xinjiang trip, again, look like those documenting previous leaders' trips there (or elsewhere in the PRC).[28] General secretary of the CPC, president, and Central Military Committee chairman Xi is pictured front and centre, or otherwise distinguished from others in the scene by an item of clothing or, in the cotton fields of Shihezi, by a pair of sporty Ray-Ban–style sunglasses (not like Joe Biden's Aviators, more like Tom Cruise's black rectangular Wayfarers in *Risky Business*). Xi is often the tallest man in the shot, especially when amid crowds of Uyghurs, over whom he towers; in a tableau photographed in the Tianshan neighbourhood of Ürümqi, Uyghur women and children were posed in the front, near Xi, while Uyghur men stood in the background, allowing Xi to rise head and shoulders above the applauding people.

But one, formerly *de rigueur* image is missing from this gallery. In the past, when in Xinjiang or interacting with Xinjiang people, Chinese leaders always posed wearing a *minzu* hat, such as the Uyghur doppa (*huamao* 花帽 in Chinese).[29] Xi's predecessors Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao each put one on; Xi himself did so in 2014, but not in 2022 —

though the group photo with the Kyrgyz *Manas* troupe offered an obvious opportunity. I could have missed a photo elsewhere, but no party-secretary-in-a-*minzu*-hat picture is among the nineteen much reposted images in the *Xinhua* report of Xi's 2022 Xinjiang visit.[30] Why?

Each *minzu* in Xinjiang has its own distinctive headgear. (There is no official Han hat; no image of a *Zhonghua* hat comes to mind.) The Chinese imperative to represent non-Han peoples in 'native costume' perpetuates the stereotype of *minzu* as eternally quaint, ethnic, traditional dancing monkeys, as opposed to people who wear a business suit to work or a stylish dress for a night out.[31] But the hats do symbolise each group's unique culture and, by donning the cap, a leader recognises that *minzu*'s individuality. Considering Xi's call on cadres to construct the 'visual image of the *Zhonghua* people', I wonder whether, as Xi phases out the 'Han plus fifty-five minority *minzu*' plural language of discrete groups in favour of the unitary 'great *Zhonghua* national family', he intentionally declined to wear the hat, to avoid even that minimal nod to distinctive identity outside the *Zhonghua* corral?

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