Minor Events and Grand Dreams:

Ethnic Outsiders in China's Postcolonial World Order

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Introduction

Weida fuxing 伟大复兴 (the Great Revival) tells a story of the Chinese people uniting and rising to reverse national humiliation by the West and *return* to their premodern, rightful place at the center of world affairs. The official China Dream of the Great Revival has been spectacularly presented in centrally orchestrated mega events, including the Olympics' cultural diplomacy, material power at the 2009 national military parade, and state-managed cosmopolitanism of the 2010 Shanghai Expo (Callahan 2012: 155). However, these tightly choreographed showcases of progress and security at China's heart conceal insecurity about its ethnic peripheries. While the 2008 Beijing Olympics slogan, "One World, One Dream," circulated across official media, riots and interethnic violence exploded in Lhasa, Tibet. The

sixtieth anniversary of the PRC's founding was subsequently overshadowed by ethnically targeted violence between Turkic-speaking Muslim Uighurs and the Han ethnic majority in Ürümqi, Xinjiang.

Since these events, *minzu tuanjie* 民族团结 (*minzu* unity)[1] and the production of a shared national identity have been officially described as "zero-sum political struggles of life or death" and prerequisites to China's rise (*Xinjiang Jiaoyu Chubanshe* 2009: 15). Official narratives conjure nightmarish, mirror images to China's dreams of prosperity and power, foretelling national collapse if ethnic minorities and Han do not self-identify as having *always* been the same nation. Toward dreams of unity and revival, China has operated mass extrajudicial internment camps in Xinjiang as *jiaoyu zhuanhua peixun zhongxin* 教育转化培训中心 (education and transformation training centers) since 2017, interning approximately one million people, 10 percent of the adult Uighur population (Zenz 2018: 1).[2] Internment camps are part of increasing controls over the Uighur population since the intensification of the *qujiduanhua* 去极端化 (de-extremification) campaign in 2015 under regional party chief Chen Quanguo (Roberts 2018: 246–50). These exceptional policies are logically consistent with the ethnocentric national narratives analyzed in this article, which target Uighur identities as obstacles to China's revival.

This article explores relations between China's foreign and ethnic policy thought to analyze the implications of China's rise for ethnic relations in Xinjiang. Instead of looking to mega events in the metropoles of Beijing and Shanghai, it analyzes minor events that focus on minority identities on China's ethnic periphery, specifically Xinjiang, a site of pessimism and insecurity for the party-state. These are *minor events*, not because of their minor importance but because they highlight the periphery's importance to the center—the centrality of producing and repressing different aspects of ethnic minority identities to propel and secure progress of the nation. Mega and minor events are both regulated and repetitive performances that enforce rules of identity. China's mega events reveal competing national narratives, both contradictory and mutually reinforcing, which interweave pride/humiliation, superiority/inferiority, and security/danger in China's national aesthetic (Callahan 2010: 9; Nordin 2012: 236). However, double ambivalence emerges in minor events through implicit acknowledgement

that national humiliation and pride in China's Great Revival are not always felt by minorities. Minor events articulate internal boundaries by identifying undesirable elements of ethnic-minority others as an absence of the progressive majority self, what Judith Butler (2007: 132) termed performative "negative elaboration." Undesirable elements of minority identities are to be eliminated so they can fit narratives of China, a five-thousand-year-old, unbroken civilization at home and modernizing, rising power abroad.

Official Chinese foreign-policy discourse orders the world into exceptionalist, civilizational camps of East/West, where China is *not* Western, *not* imperialist, and *not* warlike. Former president Hu Jintao's final speech at the eighteenth National Congress announced that China "will never copy a Western political system" (Xinhua 2012). President Xi Jinping repeated this narrative at the nineteenth National Congress but explained in racialized terms that "in Chinese blood, there is no DNA for aggression or hegemony" (*South China Morning Post* 2014). William Callahan (2013) has shown how contemporary foreign policy thought in China is driven by mutually constitutive representations of China as inherently peaceful, contrasted with Western imperial conquest. Leading public intellectuals Zhang Weiwei (2012) and Hu Angang (2012) have driven the narrative that China is a "new type of superpower" in a "post-American century," using Eastern traditions (tribute and fusion) over Western imperialist coercion to organize domestic and world order. The construct of a Chinese premodern "tribute system" derives from orientalist historical thought and was never an uncritically accepted "system" by "vassal" states that traded with or had been militarily conquered by China (Perdue 2015: 1007). The peoples inhabiting territories acquired and settled during the mid-eighteenth century Manchu imperial expansion, including Uighurs, Tibetans, and Mongolians, were only officially recategorized from external barbarians to internal ethnic minorities in the 1950s. Scholars of contemporary Xinjiang note too many similarities today between classic European colonial forms and metropolitan dominance in Xinjiang to dismiss claims that its governance represents a "colonial endeavor" (Cliff 2016: 7–9). Uighur identity justifies a state of exception in Xinjiang, enabling conflation of vernacular alternatives to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) historical narratives with armed resistance to China's rise (Bovingdon 2010: 7–9; Cliff 2016: 216). The "new type of

superpower" discourse seeks to homogenize these internal cultural frontiers through *jiaorong* 交融 (fusion), and aims to secure these frontiers to become a new superpower.

Conventional approaches to China's foreign policy in international relations (IR) literature build knowledge through domestic/international dichotomies, overlooking these relations between domestic and international identity discourses (see, e.g., Mearsheimer 2010; and Shambaugh 1996). China is often considered a "frustrated great power" because it compares its global position negatively to its premodern past (Suzuki 2008: 51). However, Chinese policy makers and IR scholars routinely place insecurities about China's survival and ethnic diversity in the historical context of China's struggle against ethnic separatism since the Han dynasty and Western imperialism since 1840. China's leaders ask how to avoid their "nightmare" that premodern minority ethnic identities could somehow derail the progressive China Dream. A postcolonial approach helps denaturalize and historicize links between knowledge production, circulation, and reappropriation in this interplay between the "domestic" and "international" (Chowdhry and Nair 2004: 28; Krishna 1999: xviii). Although postcolonial national identities are constructed in opposition to Europe, they are often implicated in colonizing practices that structure local and global power relations (Chowdhry and Nair 2004: 2). Domestic social differentiation and international demarcations between states occupy the same psychic space of inclusion/exclusion and love/hate, so that "paranoid projections outwards return to haunt and split the place from which they are made" (Bhabha 1990: 300). Boundary instantiations differentiating China from the West are refracted inward, demanding minorities *progress* toward modernity and a shared non-Western, Chinese identity. However, these boundaries ambivalently position ethnic minorities between inclusion as Chinese and exclusion as *luohou* 落后 (backward) non-Han, fracturing official narratives of timeless unity.

This article examines discursive relations between the *return* to international greatness and the *minzu wenti* 民族问题 (*minzu* problem) in contemporary China. It analyzes this relationship in textual and visual narratives at public exhibitions in Xinjiang, celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC's founding. The first section uses Benjamin's (1940) idea of "homogenous and empty time" to analyze tensions in official thought on ethnic

identity between universalist progress toward homogeneity and particularist Chinese traditions of diversity. The Great Revival envisions linear progress toward modernity but fractures the timeless unity it seeks to produce as ethnocentric dreams of homogenous futures and restoration of Chinese tradition target non-Han identities as problems to be solved by cultural conversion. The second section explores how the sixtieth-anniversary exhibitions ambivalently envisioned timeless continuity *and* dramatic progress toward China's great revival, particularly in the "Uncle Kurban" story, a metaphor for Xinjiang's integration into China. Within official discourse, two key positions on ethnicity debate China's past and future identity as a multiethnic (see, e.g., Hao 2012; and Wang 2012) or monoethnic (see, e.g., Hu and Hu 2012; Ma 2012; and Zhu 2012) superpower. Both narratives circulate but recent policy developments in Xinjiang and the unusual absence of mention of *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族 (minority *minzu*) in nineteenth Party Congress documents suggest the monoethnic model of fusion currently predominates. The third section analyses how the "first generation" of ethnic policy circulated in the exhibitions' narratives, proposing economic development as the means toward gradual but inevitable disappearance of ethnic difference. The final section examines the circulation of the "second generation" position, which recommends explicit and planned cultural conversion of Uighurs. "Second generation" thinkers argue that state policies, including monolingual and patriotic education, must be consciously planned to produce immediate minority identification with *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族 (the Chinese nation). Only then can China progress from a backward, ethnic past toward the Great Revival.

The central argument is that China's policy makers and public intellectuals domestically refract anxieties about China's self-perceived "backwardness" compared to former colonial powers, blaming minorities for China's fragile identity and lack of modernization. China's leading thinkers on ethnic politics adapt colonial binaries (East/West and modernity/backwardness) to a traditional internal hierarchy of *huayi* 华夷 (civilization/barbarism) between Han and non-Han. Minor events narrate China's history and future through these deep anxieties about relations between ethnic minority identities and China's global position, predicating progress toward prosperity and power on elimination of internal ethnic difference and backwardness.

Progress and Postcoloniality in Contemporary China

This section analyzes how official and intellectual Chinese thought on ethnic identity revolves around tensions between universalist progress toward cultural homogeneity and particularist traditions of multiplicity. Benjamin's critique of universalist approaches to identity showed that historical materialism, fascism, and liberalism share linear conceptions of progress, privileging European experience and expecting non-European societies to irresistibly move in the same direction. The "unstoppable" progress of "homogeneous and empty time" moves toward a messianic future, promising prosperity but presenting itself as natural and inevitable (Benjamin 1940: sec. 13). This idea of linear progress toward modernity assumes all societies move toward value-neutral homogeneity. The notion of multiple modernities attempts but fails to address Eurocentrism because it overlooks how European colonialism was integral to the construction and diffusion of modernity itself, so all routes lead to bureaucratic rationality (Bhambra 2010: 135). If time is conceived as moving in a unilinear direction toward a prosperous future, alternative visions of the future become threats to progress. The universalism of progress renders alternative modes of historical thinking or self-identification as premodern and futile (Chatterjee 2001: 401−2). The past does not inform the present but haunts it as an unthinkable prospect, which cannot happen *in this day and age*. This "historical certainty and settled nature" conceals the nation as "an obscure and ubiquitous form living the *locality* of culture" (Bhabha 1990: 291−92). Progress, therefore, is always political and must be problematized in its living sociohistorical context.

The idea of progress ambivalently narrates nations as timeless *and* the highest, most modern form of identity. China's official Great Revival discourse offers a messianic, prosperous future *and* a return to an exceptional past before the mid-nineteenth-century arrival of European colonial powers. For China to become a *fuqiang guo* 富强国 (prosperous great power) *again*, it must progress the national mission toward modernity to be able to restore ancient tradition. This mission to progress beyond a "backward" past at all costs reflects "postcolonial anxieties," where dreams of the past, present, and future in the developing world become mimetic constructions of

what has happened elsewhere ("we are as good as . . .") (Krishna 1999: xix). However, postcoloniality in China is complex because China is postcolonial with reference to itself as much as with the West and Japan (Fiskesjö 2017: 6). In China, mimetic modernity is the means to defeat Western hegemony, returning China to the center of the world *and* the Han majority to the center of China.

China's leaders explicitly define colonialism as a Western phenomenon and insist that China is unlike Western nation-states because it is a "multi-*minzu* nation commonly created by all (Chinese) *minzu*" (Zhongguo Guowuyuan Xinwenban 2009a: 1). The CCP differentiates China's identity from the West through rejection of universal values as "excuses to split China" (Xinjiang Jiaoyu Chubanshe 2009: 44–45). However, since the 1949 revolution, the party-state adopted a self-avowedly universalist theory of ethnic identity and applied it to all human history and potential futures. Historical materialism, a legacy of the European intellectual heritage of modernity in Asia (Chakrabarty 2000: 4), has deeply shaped ideas of progress in official Chinese political thought. *Minzu* identities were understood as remnants of class exploitation from earlier stages of development, which will gradually and naturally disappear with economic progress (*Shijian Bianjibu* 1965: 213). The contemporary party-state narrates a universalist conception of world history by explaining, "the world we live in is a world of *minzu*" (Zhongguo Guowuyuan Xinwenban 2009a: 1). However, concerns that this vision of modernity may bring Western-style homogeneity are expressed among ethnic policy theorists and social anthropologists, some warning that China's progress should "not repeat the same mistakes as the West" (Bao 2011).

Colonial legacies in China are complexes of intercultural translation. Unlike European Orientalism, official Chinese Occidentalism has no history of dominating the West but aims to "discipline, and ultimately dominate, the Chinese self at home" (Chen 2002: 3). Chinese elites downplay the European-ness of Marxism (progress) and nationalism (state sovereignty) because the CCP authority historically rests on struggle against Western colonialism. However, even the Han ethnonym emerged through intercultural translations of race from colonial Europe in early twentieth-century contestations over biological and cultural conceptualizations of Chinese identity (Chow 2001: 48). Conceptualizing colonialism as inherently Western

conceals how its universalizing binary narrative of modernity/backward-ness is directed inward in China, shaping problematic integration of ethnic minority regions. Deploying colonialism as inherently Western silences ethnic minority claims for identity recognition in China because colonialism is inconceivable in non-Western contexts.

Official Chinese conceptualizations of ethnicity show how colonial binaries (East/West and modernity/backwardness) are refracted and redirected inward. Lewis Morgan remains at the top of leading universities' anthropology reading lists and is celebrated as central to the party's "historical materialist" approach to ethnic relations (see, e.g., Pan 2008). Morgan's (2005) theory of cultural evolution justified European colonization of the Americas by explaining culture as superstructural to superior or inferior material development. In China, minority *minzu* are popularly represented as exotic, erotic, and primitive, thus, relationally narrating majority Han identity as civilized, modern, and superior (Gladney 2004: 13–16). Ethnic minorities are represented through internal Orientalism as agricultural, feminine, and backward but also as inalienable components of the Chinese nation (Schein 2000: 130). The culture of Uighurs and ethnic minorities in Xinjiang are explained, using Morgan's framework, as superstructural to their material base ("animal husbandry") in contrast to the two-thousand-year-old *tunken wenhua* 屯垦文化 (frontier-building culture) of the active Han (Guojia Minwei Minzu Wenti Yanjiu Zhongxin 2009: 24–55, 80–97). The Han's "active spirit" drove cultural "fusion" to unite China and develop Xinjiang throughout history, with "simple, uncomplicated assistance of minority *minzu* armies" (87). The "new China" continues "historical progress" by binding center and periphery together in a relationship of *jingji hubu* 经济互补 (economic complementarity), in which the central plains have always "supplied minority *minzu* with everything they need for daily living" (Zhongguo Guowuyuan Xinwenban 2009a: 6; Xinjiang Jiaoyu Chubanshe 2009: 66). This hierarchical dependency discourse, where non-Han cannot survive, let alone progress, without Han guidance, narrates ambivalent identities for minorities because they are eternally backward *and* moving toward progress since *heping jiefang* 和平解放 (peaceful liberation) by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1949 (Zhongguo Guowuyuan Xinwenban 2009b: 4).

The United States' imperial encounters with the Philippines similarly

justified inequality ("economic complementarity") and force ("peaceful liberation") through representations of the "natives" as savages with no capacity for self-determination (Doty 1996: 71). This narrative seeks to convince the natives that "if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality" (Fanon 1967: 37). While the Oriental is eternally backward, universal nationalism conceptualizes all humanity as capable of progress, even if defined ethnocentrically. The colonial chauvinism of Orientalism and ethnocentric universalism of nationalism have always been in tension in European colonial thought (Chatterjee 2001: 38). In China, ethnic minority identities are officially framed within this tension, through Orientalist, timeless, backwardness *and* the nationalist logic of universal progress. All *minzu* can struggle toward homogenous and empty progress but only the ethnic majority have mastered it and can teach it to minorities. Li Dezhu (2007), then-chair of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, publicly reminded minorities that they "need to learn from the advanced culture of the Han." Minorities must identify with narratives of China where they have always been internal others but their backward history can be overcome by progress and the Great Revival, paradoxically, to return to past traditions when minorities were barbarians. Postcolonial anxieties about global power in China are domestically redirected by blaming ethnic minorities for China's underdevelopment and fragile identity, producing an ambivalent future for their identities. China's leading public thinkers and policy makers are explicitly "antihegemonic" but embrace colonial thought's underlying logical binaries that categorize human cultures as modern or barbarous. They seek to convert minorities from barbarism to modernity in China's global struggle for power with colonial states.

The Great Revival in Xinjiang

This section analyzes tensions between nationalist inclusion and orientalist exclusion of non-Han identities at the sixtieth-anniversary exhibition in 2009, particularly the story of "Uncle Kurban," a metaphor for Xinjiang's integration into China. The photography exhibition to "celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the PRC" was curated by the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region government and the Xinjiang CCP Standing

Committee. Photographs of top regional political leaders visiting the exhibition made headlines of local news articles and television news. Museums and public exhibitions are always "profoundly political" and European colonizers used such monuments to perform the rationality and progress of "nation builders" against the poverty of "the natives" in strict identity hierarchies (Anderson 1991: 179). The positioning of ethnic minorities as internal others in the exhibition's visions of world order and timeless domestic hierarchy offers a window into China's postcolonial anxieties. The exhibition tells a story of backward and ethnic Xinjiang progressing through time toward the Great Revival but contained within the timeless continuity of a hierarchically structured Chinese national subject.

The exhibition was held in the International Expo Centre in the Han-populated north of Ürümqi, known for trade, employment, and housing fairs that attract large businesses and wealthy residents. Entry was free and audiences were composed of a range of age groups and social classes, most of which were couples teaching children to read the captions. Visitors were mainly Han and only one visiting Uighur couple was observed over two days. Considerable numbers of the audience were police and PLA troops who used the front courtyard as a station since the July violence. Wandering the exhibition with automatic weapons casually dangling by their sides, the troops reinforced the ever-present possibility of state violence to protect tightly managed textual narratives. Introductory and concluding texts were presented in Mandarin and Uighur but all other captions were solely in Mandarin. The exhibition's use of Mandarin highlights the tension between including Uighurs as timelessly Chinese yet excluding their language as unbefitting of modern, national culture. It reflects official policy, since 2004, to rapidly transform Xinjiang's education system into Mandarin-medium only, to "modernize" minorities (Ma 2007). Visitors followed the scripts accompanying the images, leading them in a linear direction of teleological progress from a backward ethnic past to a developing present and a prosperous, messianic future.

After entering the building, visitors faced a huge LCD television displaying contrasting representations of modern and traditional Xinjiang: the modern-day city of Kashgar alongside vast deserts and mountain ranges. A film began visually plotting the Silk Road route on a map of ancient China

in a single direction from Beijing to Xinjiang and from East to West. The Silk Road circled Xinjiang, connecting its ancient oasis towns with inner China. The potentially cosmopolitan Silk Road metaphor is often used in China to stress *Chinese* cultural-commercial exports and uniqueness (Millward 2009: 55). As a symbol of progress, the route carefully remained within the PRC's contemporary borders, enclosing Xinjiang's past and present solely within China. The map positioned Xinjiang as timelessly closed to the external world and solely interconnected with the central plains. Maps tell us how to feel about where and who we are, and "creative tensions" in Chinese cartography between ancient, imperial frontiers and fixed, modern national borders inscribe the PRC's twenty-first-century geo-body on all Chinese history (Callahan 2009: 149, 172). The Silk Road map performed China's ancient and contemporary boundaries together by superimposing ancient, unbounded trade routes on a contemporary, bounded political map. It told visitors to feel Chinese and that peoples of Xinjiang have *always* felt Chinese. However, the movement of peoples and goods running only from east to west highlighted the two regions' distinctiveness in a dependent relationship where agency and progress are things done *to* and not *by* Xinjiang.

As the video moved to long slow shots of deserts, mountain ranges, and grasslands, mysterious panpipe music created an exoticized atmosphere. Images of timeless natural scenery morphed into contemporary pictures of ethnic minorities, wearing traditional clothes, working in rural settings, picking cotton, herding sheep, and traveling on horseback. The film then shifted to images of traditionally dressed Uighurs preparing and serving Xinjiang food (kebabs, laghman, and polo) to urban Han. Viewers eventually returned to rural scenery as the music changed to "Xinjiang Is a Good Place," an official Uighur "folk song" that celebrates Xinjiang's natural beauty to entice Han migrants to "come, come, come" and build the frontier. Accelerating rapidly, the images progressed from past to future, flying over natural scenery to leave the ancient architecture of the majority Uighur city of Kashgar, arriving in the modern Chinese urban environment of Ürümqi. A showcase of urban development ensued with shots of skyscrapers and paved streets, while Han Chinese residents in modern clothes, busily walked the streets, using their modern smartphones. The camera pace, the urban environment, modern clothing, and technology all contrasted with the tra-

Figure 1 Right: "Breathe together, share a common fate, heart linked to heart."
Photograph courtesy of the author.

ditional, rural, and slow minority *minzu*, relationally constituting Han and
minority cultures through their level of modernity. The song called for Han
to "come, come, come" to Xinjiang alongside images of political leaders in
modern suits (Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, Wang Lequan, and Nur Bekri),
shaking hands and giving money to smiling Uighur peasants in traditional
clothes. These images performed Xinjiang's position in China as a passive
receiver of subsidies and moderniztion. The video ended with a large group
of smiling Uighurs in traditional clothing, dancing in the modern, Chinese-
built urban environment of Ürümqi with the superimposed slogan, "Xinji-
ang Is a Good Place."

Upon entering the exhibition space, visitors faced the image of fifty-five
smiling minority *minzu* (fig. 1). The introductory text explained its meaning:
"Since the establishment of the new China . . . every *minzu* has arduously
struggled and resolutely forged ahead to absolutely *transform* Xinjiang's

state of impoverished and empty backwardness. North and south of the Tianshan mountains has seen earth-shaking change."

The timeless continuity of Chinese presence and its contemporary "struggle" against "empty backwardness" has paradoxically transformed Xinjiang through unparalleled modernization ("earth-shaking change"). This modern/backward binary constitutes Han identity as the active source of "liberation" and modernity on the backward, ethnic frontier. This transformative rupture is framed as a restoration of tradition and continuation of the telos of Chinese unity. However, this binary produces unresolvable tensions between continuity and transformation. China is a timeless nation but Xinjiang's "liberation" from itself ruptures any linear flow of national time.

Han and minority *minzu* are mutually constitutive categories, which normatively order fifty-six *minzu* into a binary of active, national, and modern Han against the passive, ethnicized dependency of minority *minzu*, happy with their inferior position in China. This relationship between a modern Han center and backward minority periphery is exemplified in the apocryphal tale of Kurban Tulum. The story is told through the famous photograph of Kurban meeting with Mao Zedong in 1958 at Zhongnanhai, home of the CCP central committee (fig. 2a). The *Kurban Dashu* 库尔班大叔 (*Uncle Kurban*) narrative continues to grow in circulation across the Chinese blogosphere with over 48,000 pages on Baidu in 2012, jumping to over 260,000 by 2018, and 217,000 hits on Google in 2012, jumping to nearly 8 million by 2018. This image is replicated in an imposing twelve-meter-high bronze statue in the center of Hotan, a southern Uighur-majority city. The story is retold in semi-unofficial cultural forms such as the 2003 film *Big Uncle Kurban Goes to Beijing*, the revolutionary song "Uncle Kurban Rides a Donkey to Beijing," and oil paintings on sale for tourists around Ürümqi, including at the exhibition. Popular media repeats official narratives told through the online encyclopedia Baidu Baike and Tianshan.net, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region government's news site. Uncle Kurban is a crystalized metaphor for the narrative of linear Chinese progress to modernize and ambivalently include Uighurs.

قۇربان توللۇم (Kurban Tulum) was born in 1883 into a family of Uighur peasants in Yutian County. Kurban joined the CCP in 1959, participating in

Figure 2a (top left) "Tremendously changing frontier: Warm Care. Chair Mao and Kurban warmly shake hands." Photograph courtesy of the author.
Figure 2b (top right) "1981: Deng Xiaoping and Kazakh nomads together in Sha'erdaban village." Photograph courtesy of the author.
Figure 2c (bottom left) "Jiang Zemin and peasants warmly talk together." Photograph courtesy of the author.
Figure 2d (bottom right) "Hu Jintao warmly converses with a cotton grower while on inspection in Luopu County." Photograph courtesy of the author.

the fourth People's Congress, becoming vice chair of the Yutian County Revolutionary Committee and an official "nationally celebrated labor model." The official narrative states that after the early death of Kurban's parents, Kurban survived childhood by living in a sheep's pen and picking wild fruits. Following the later death of his wife, Kurban lived a "savage's life" for seventeen years until "released" by "peaceful liberation," when Mao Zedong allowed him "to return to the human world and live a prosperous life" (Tianshan.net 2006). Kurban, like Xinjiang, has always been Chinese but only progresses to become human when liberated by China from his own backwardness. After liberation, Uncle Kurban baked fifty kilos of nan breads and decided to travel to Beijing by donkey to pay tribute to the CCP (Baike 2012). Kurban expressed gratitude by paying imperial-style tribute to Mao Zedong with fruits of liberation: the best dried apricots and sweet melons or raisins and Hami melons, according to different sources (Baike 2012; Tianshan.net 2006). The "simple, uncomplicated assistance of minority *minzu*" offered fruits from the "natural economy" and a smile in exchange for "liberation" and "modernization" by the Han's "active spirit." Given the distance and "backward" mode of transport, local government officials attempted to dissuade Kurban from traveling. Nevertheless, Kurban insisted on journeying from periphery to center to pay tribute to Xinjiang's liberators in a new Sino-centric world order. Uncle Kurban persisted because of faith in China and when Party heads heard this tale, they immediately flew Kurban to Beijing. This story "moved Mao Zedong and he said Xinjiang's ordinary ethnic minorities are very good" (Tianshan.net 2006). As the song, "Uncle Kurban Rides a Donkey to Beijing" recounts, "today the sky has changed, the land has changed. The eternal past of facing tyranny does not rely on prayers or spirits.[3] It relies on the Communist Party and Chair Mao." The tale ends with the famous photograph from Zhongnanhai of tears in Kurban's eyes, unable to speak from being so moved by Chair Mao's "warm care."

In official narratives, Xinjiang is dragged through linear time by China and liberated from an ethnic past of animal savagery into a national future of human prosperity. Uncle Kurban and Xinjiang become more prosperous and more human as they identify with China and their need to be liberated. This story narrates China as an ethno-hierarchy with the Han at the apex.

The images in the exhibition that followed this section reproduced this dependency in contemporary ethnic relations through a chronological series of photos of Han Chinese leaders dressed in modern, urban clothing meeting minority peasants in traditional costumes (figs. 2b–2d). These imposing images narrate ethnic relations through mutually reinforcing binaries that bind each generation of China's leaders in timeless hierarchical relations of postcolonial anxiety with Xinjiang. The paradoxically timeless continuity of rapid transformation of the internal oriental is reproduced by maintaining boundaries between rural, passive, and traditional Xinjiang (traditionally dressed, grateful peasants) and urban, active, and modern China (Han leaders in modern suits). To be Chinese, Uncle Kurban and Xinjiang must identify with this timeless boundary and be *happy* to be perpetually liberated by China from their own backwardness.

Material Evolution on the Chinese Frontier

This section analyses the second part of the exhibition, "precious memories," to show how economic development was officially framed as one solution to the *minzu* problem and the means to a shared identity in Xinjiang. "Precious memories" exemplified the party-state's traditional historical materialism, reiterated by the "first generation" of ethnic minority policy scholars, including Hao Shiyuan (2012) and Wang Xi'en (2012). They argue that as a multiethnic socialist nation, China's economic development will inevitably resolve class conflict, resulting in the *natural* disappearance of ethnicity and strengthening of Chinese identity. "Second generation" thinkers, Hu Angang and Ma Rong, conversely argue that policy must immediately and deliberately engineer a monoethnic national identity through monolingual education and elimination of the minority *minzu* category altogether. Hao (2012) challenged Hu's (2012) argument that all great empires, including China, are unified by majority identity, suggesting that national chauvinism, not ethnic minority identities, lead to their collapse, including the Soviet Union. However, these competing visions of China both reinforce the underlying logics that minority identities are problems to be overcome by progress toward international rejuvenation.

The "precious memories" section of the exhibition exemplified materi-

alist conceptualizations of progress from a backward past to modernizing present under the CCP, specifically through the contemporary infrastructure feats of the Western Development Project (WDP). The WDP largely invested in infrastructure and state-owned resource-extraction industries to supply manufacturing and energy needs of eastern China under the auspices of developing minority regions (Goodman 2002). Jiang Zemin's description of the WDP as a "major *strategic* mission" to deepen integration and protect national unity reveal the project's noneconomic logics and ideological foundation as a "civilizing imperative" where the backward, ethnic west must learn from the advanced Han Chinese east (Barabantseva 2009: 250; Holbig 2004: 341). Ethnicized representations of backwardness as a threat to the Great Revival reproduce the need for the modernization and conversion of Xinjiang's peoples.

The Uighur district of Ürümqi (*Erdaoqiao* 二道桥 / *Döngköwrük* دۆڭكۆۋرۈك) is a site in need of significant transformation in the party-state's identity narratives. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the district was a Uighur and Hui city, physically separated by walls from adjacent Han and Manchu cities (Gaubatz 1996: 2–3). In today's Ürümqi, Han residents often describe it in terms of danger and need of transformation (see, e.g., Tobin, forthcoming). The exhibition's "precious memories" display opened with a series of images of Xinjiang shortly after the 1949 arrival of Communist troops. The first caption, "First Plough of the Military Reclamation of Wasteland," used official vocabulary to describe Han Chinese troops ploughing the land as active pioneers liberating Xinjiang (fig. 3a). Like the ethnocentric texts that defined cultural evolution as temporal journeys of minority identities to become more like the majority, these narratives left the ethnicity of Han migrants unmarked and naturalized this transformative cultural project. The images represented Xinjiang as an empty wasteland to be developed by China's natural technological and economic superiority. The modern/backward binary was vividly performed in collections of side-by-side photographs contrasting the abysmality of "pre-liberation" material life with rapid "post-liberation" progress. The images depicted Xinjiang's progress from the Uighur district's "pre-liberation" "slums" to "post-liberation" "beautiful scenery," from "dirt roads" to "tall buildings and plazas," and from "peasant housing" to "modern housing" (figs. 3b–3c).

Advancements in production were represented by contrasting *Uighur* traditional handcrafts with industrialized assembly lines staffed by *Han* workers (figs. 3d–3e). The ethnocentric narrative avoided acknowledging the significance of ethnicity and performed China as a socialist nation where progress is a normatively neutral, natural process of economic development moving toward prosperity and shared identity.

The modernization narrative moved to the WDP's engineering feats, such as development of Tarim oil fields by state-owned SINOPEC (fig. 4a), newly built highways ("multicolored roads"), and the project to "send western gas east." The "strategic mission" emerged in militaristic language of national security, describing investment in oil extraction as the will to "join the battle" (fig. 4a). The "battle" is to transform an "impoverished and empty" frontier into a prosperous and secure region, whose people identify as Chinese. Infrastructure investment was narrated into China's socialist national aesthetic as a thing of beauty. "Multicolored roads" fill and light up empty deserts, and, like the ancient Silk Road did, the "magnificent topography" of gas pipelines connect Xinjiang with the rest of China.

The exhibition moved seamlessly from examples of engineering to social dimensions of development under the same heading, "Looking After the People's Livelihood." The most common images were smiling, traditional Uighurs expressing appreciation to China for raising their levels of social development, like Uncle Kurban (fig. 4b). This boundary between active, advanced "frontier culture" hurtling toward the future and the passive, backward minority *minzu* of the past was reaffirmed through willing mimetic participation of minority *minzu*, being *given* benefits of Chinese modernity ("radio and television") and liberated from themselves. This colonial binary circulated in performative exhibitions across the city, using the same materials analyzed here with the same explanatory captions: a near-identical sixtieth-anniversary exhibition at the city library held by the city-level Party Department of Information; bilingual posters titled "Yesterday, Today" displayed publicly across the city by the regional Party Department of Information; and permanent photo exhibitions in the Uighur district's Erdaoqiao Tower. The exhibitions followed the same linear structure, displaying a backward, ethnic past rapidly progressing toward a modern Chinese future.

Figure 3a (top left) "First plough of the military reclamation of wasteland." Photograph courtesy of the author.
Figure 3b (middle left) "Dirt roads of *nanmen* pre-liberation." Photograph courtesy of the author.
Figure 3c (top right) "*Nanmen* surrounded by tall buildings and plazas." Photograph courtesy of the author.
Figure 3d (bottom left) "Hand-spinning cloth-weaving in Kashgar preliberation." Photograph courtesy of the author.
Figure 3e (bottom right) "Young female workers in Kashgar textile factory." Photograph courtesy of the author.

Figure 4a (left) "Tarim Oilfields: In 1984 SINOPEC opened oil and gas fields in the Tarim and from this prelude on, PetroChina will join the battle." Photograph courtesy of the author.
Figure 4b (right) "Every village is connected to radio and television broadcasts: Since 1995, the government has implemented popular engineering projects: 'extending coverage to every village,' 'new project for the west,' and 'bringing television to 10,000 homes.'" Photograph courtesy of the author.

No exhibit offered representations of minority *minzu* as active, modern, or urban. The presence of Han was conversely represented through their dynamic contribution to development and conversion of Xinjiang from a state of impoverished emptiness into a modern and industrialized "good place." The "historical materialist" discourse represents "tall buildings" and "beautiful scenery" of today's Uighur district as aesthetically beautiful socialist achievements toward the Great Revival to overcome the ugly obstacle of Xinjiang's backwardness. The first generation's "historical materialist" approach to cultural evolution is less chauvinist than ethnocentric but uncritically positions Han identity as the dynamic source of China's beauty and modernity. The identities of minority *minzu* are mutually constituted as ugly obstacles to China's domestic unity and international revival. The stark contrasts between an abysmal and static ethnic past against a dynamic and

prosperous Chinese present is a colonial vision of progress where the natives *need* their colonizers in order to be economically transformed and liberated from themselves. China's goal to surpass the West on the international stage and the subjection of internal ethnic others to European-influenced, colonial visions of linear progress are mutually constituted policy goals. Uighurs are narrated as eternally backward, internal reminders of global national humiliation. Postcolonial nationalism in China does not "deny the alleged inferiority of the colonised," as Chatterjee (2001: 30) suggests, rather it coexists in creative tension with internal Orientalism. China works toward reversal of national humiliation by blaming domestic minority others for this self-perceived inferiority.

Cultural Conversion of the Frontier

This section examines the "second generation" of ethnic minority policy discourse in the exhibition, which argues China needs rapid cultural conversion of Uighur identity to progress. The "second generation," most notably Hu Angang (2012), Zhu Weiqun (2012), and Ma Rong (2012), argue that China can only become a "new type of superpower" if it abandons ethnic differentiation altogether and minorities identify solely with *Zhonghua minzu*. These thinkers argue that for China to "to develop into a modernized nation" and achieve the Great Revival, policies must directly promote conversion of minority identities into the cultural and economic superiority of the Han (Ma 2007: 240–41). The exhibition's visual representations in subsequent sections continued to narrate dependent relations where China must modernize passive Uighur subjects. However, the focus moved from material progress to more explicit discourses of cultural conversion. These were less unconsciously ethnocentric and more chauvinist in their conceptualizations of cultural progress and support of a monoethnic nation-state.

The exhibition's narrative moved from material progress to images of cultural progress of ordinary people under China's guidance. The contrast between pre- and post-liberation was developed to show, for example, how women are offered more social opportunities by China than Uighurs could achieve by themselves (fig. 5a and 5b). The images narrated Uighur women as "liberated" by China since their social position has progressed

Figure 5a (left) "Lowly social position of women before liberation." Photograph courtesy of the author.

Figure 5b (right) "The bold and vigorous spirit of women today." Photograph courtesy of the author.

from "lowly" (fig. 5a) to a "bold and vigorous spirit" (fig. 5b). Since 1949, the CCP has presented itself as the liberator of women from the feudalism and inequality of traditional Confucian society (Hershatter 1993: 110). However, Chinese scholars of ethnicity in Xinjiang today conceal this history by using party-state discourse to assert that patriarchy flows only from Islam, and China has always been a liberating force (Bellér-Hann 2001: 11). Women in China are often represented as "barometers of social crisis," and they were to be liberated *for* and *by* the nation as embodiments rather than active agents of China (Hershatter 1993: 112; Duara 1995: 298). However, Uighur women are liberated twice, first from backward Uighur feudalism, and second from their own identity. Uighur women in the exhibition were barometers of Xinjiang's movement along the linear telos of empty and homogenous nation-time. Uighur women progressed from wretched, colorless states of backwardness and cultural exclusion under Uighur patriarchy to a colorful

future of Chinese liberation. China's own history of patriarchy was invisibilized, and China is relationally constituted as timelessly progressive against Xinjiang's backwardness.

These sections of the exhibition represented the "second generation" argument that Mandarin-medium education will propel Uighur cultural evolution. Official sources state that Mandarin transcends ethnicity because it transmits "modern information" in ways minority languages cannot (Xinjiang Jiaoyu Chubanshe 2009: 91–93). Language is a crucial, self-identified component of Uighur identity but is officially positioned *behind* Han-ness as an obstacle to a shared identity and connection to the outside world. Uighurs, thus, must be educated in Mandarin to progress through nation-time toward modernity. The exhibits showed how the party-state guides young Uighurs to blossom and prosper through Mandarin-medium education policies (fig. 6a: "Bilingual Education hastens buds"). These texts conflate Hanyu ("language of the Han") and *Zhongwen* ("language of China") and elide the category of *minzu* (Han) with the multi-*minzu* nation (China). This elision positions Han-ness as a superior but value-neutral modern identity into which minorities must be absorbed. The "vigorous support of the nation" from Uighur children through salutes to the flag in return for education represented Uighur contentment with this inferior subject position (fig. 6b). Uighur children, therefore, become Chinese by being modernized and they are modernized by becoming Chinese.

The "harmony *tuanjie* stories" exhibit expressed the need for violence to integrate Xinjiang into Chinese telos, framing cultural conversion of Uighurs as a national security issue. *Minzu tuanjie* is taught to high school and university students in Xinjiang as the basis of "national strength" and the "Great Revival of the Chinese people" (Zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuanbu lilunju 2009). These narratives offer inclusion and peace to Uighurs who convert and identify with the CCP's narrative, coupled with mirror images of exclusion and violence for those who resist: "Our struggle against *jingneiwai sangu shili* 境内外三股势力 (inside/outside Three Evils) is a struggle between protecting national unity against national separatism and protecting *minzu tuanjie* against *minzu* separatism. It is a zero-sum political struggle of life or death" (Xinjiang Jiaoyu Chubanshe 2009: 15).

Figure 6a (left) "Bilingual Education Hastens Buds." Photograph courtesy of the author.
Figure 6b (right) "Rain and dew moistens seedlings: From 2003 to 2005, the regional government, under vigorous support from the nation, has made investments of more than 300 million *Renminbi*, reaching a stage of comprehensive free nine-year compulsory education for impoverished families." Photograph courtesy of the author.

The struggle against the Three Evils ("terrorism, separatism, and extremism") mutually constitutes the struggle for *minzu tuanjie* in a Han-centered China. Official texts assert that *only* "the Three Evils" (i.e., separatists, terrorists, and extremists) dispute the party-state's narrative that Uighurs are "not a Turkic *minzu*" and "not an Islamic *minzu*" (Xinjiang Jiaoyu Chubanshe 2009: 55). The attributive phrase, "inside/outside," links disaffected Uighurs inside China, who frame their identity as Turkic or Islamic, with external "dangers" of terrorism (see, e.g., Xinjiang Jiaoyu Chubanshe 2009; and Zhongguo Guowuyuan Xinwenban 2009b). Uighurs are inside China's physical territory but their identity is positioned outside the core of its timeless civilization of *Zhonghua minzu*. The exhibition displayed photos of "the mighty army" grimacing with raised swords, to represent the necessity of violence to enforce *tuanjie* (fig. 7a), alongside doves of peace flying across

Figure 7a (left) "The mighty army—the troops of the Xinjiang People's Armed Police."
Photograph courtesy of the author.
Figure 7b (right) "Ürümchi People's Square." Photograph courtesy of the author.

People's Square (fig. 7b). Violence against the enemies of the Three Evils was the mirror image of peace offered to the friends of *minzu tuanjie* in the struggle for the progress of China's rise. However, this threat of violence is a reminder of the daily realities of state and nonstate violence in Xinjiang that disrupts narratives of timeless unity and progress to produce an ambivalently inclusive national hierarchy.

After moving from backward past to modernizing present, a vision of China's future emerged, offering similarly unintentional fractures and ambivalence. A modern jet was depicted taking off and flying into the sunset, transcending Xinjiang's cultural isolation and backwardness by embracing Chinese progress to modernity. The text explained that the last sixty years were a "twinkling of the eye" in historical terms but "in terms of the history of Xinjiang, they have written a glorious new chapter." With *minzu tuanjie* and stability, "Xinjiang will have a more beautiful tomorrow." This

prosperous and powerful future is incumbent upon modernization of Xinjiang and conversion of Uighur identity. This was a "necessary future" along a line of continuous yet ambivalent development (Bhabha 1990: 295). Under guidance of the ethnic majority, all potential futures are distilled into a singular path, the "direction of history," along which Xinjiang will progress to a prosperous future in a secure, revived *Zhonghua minzu*. The future is "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which has been China's nominal ruling ideology since the Deng era. The meaning of Chinese characteristics will be contested in perpetuity through tensions between tradition/ modernity, continuity/transformation, and inclusion/exclusion as China progresses toward becoming the real China *again* along a linear path of rational progress to its messianic destiny. China's destiny is to progress toward the past in the future, but the more the party-state imposes homogeneity, the more the past and future become marked by ambivalence and diversity.

As visitors left the exhibition, they *returned* to the beginning of the story on the Silk Road two thousand years ago. Time had progressed from past to present to future, only to *return* to ancient China and hear again that "Xinjiang Is a Good Place." This song was performed on the PRC's sixtieth-anniversary television gala and witnessed young, smiling Uighur women in makeup and traditional Uighur costume, dancing alongside powerful Han Chinese PLA men in uniform (CCTV 2009). These cultural performances articulate the official relationship between Xinjiang and China, where passive, feminine Xinjiang welcomes the active and progressive power of domestically masculine China. As CCTV's live National Day celebrations from Beijing were closing, ambivalence in Xinjiang was visible and visceral. Televised Beijing, the center of China, was shrouded in darkness, and as presenters wished viewers a good night, the sun remained glowing in the Ürümqi sky. Uighurs implicitly challenge official discourses of time and progress as value-free representations by using Xinjiang time, two hours behind official Beijing time, thus creating parallel temporal worlds (Smith Finley 2013: 139–41). As Beijing dimmed, the streets of Ürümqi came alive with residents, and restaurants only began to fill up with customers. The evening in Xinjiang was just beginning and Beijing appeared as another land, distant and, quite literally, in the future.

Conclusions

Official Chinese discourse renders minority ethnic identities as premodern and futile by framing modernization and conversion of Xinjiang as inevitable and value-neutral teleological outcomes. This article explored how tensions between ethnic inclusion and exclusion within official Chinese discourse play out in public exhibitions to celebrate China's revival and modernization of its frontiers. The content in the PRC's sixtieth-anniversary exhibitions in Xinjiang was linked to government policy, official texts, intellectual debates, and even popular "folk songs." These connections illustrate that modernization and cultural conversion are broader public discourses in which competing perspectives on Chinese identity play out within the Great Revival narrative. This minor event reflected ambivalent tensions within the Great Revival narrative between visions of China the multiethnic nation and China the Han nation-state. This minor event narrated the past and future of China, but, unlike mega events, it placed the peripheral role of ethnic minority identities at the center of the grand unfolding of Chinese telos. The dreams offered to Uighurs from above articulate their need for economic development or cultural conversion to propel China's future toward prosperity and surpass the West. However, the two competing perspectives on ethnic politics, "first generation" multiculturalism and "second generation" monoculturalism, are mutually reinforcing in the final analysis. They are both based on linear visions of modernity, which equate Han-ness with progress. While the "first generation" argues that progress should be left to the anonymity of development and Marxist dialectics ("cultural evolution"), the "second generation" proposes to socially engineer a shared Chinese identity. Each narrative reproduces similar underlying logics of progress because ethnic identities are viewed as problems to be solved by progress and, in the end, by the messianic destiny of China's Great Revival.

China's political future is officially articulated through its past. China's rise is dreamed as a messianic return to a traditional Sino-centric world order. Chinese leaders and public intellectuals articulate the optimism of five thousand years of unbroken civilization and the pessimism that Xinjiang remains officially and unofficially marked as un-Chinese. In the short term, violence is understood as necessary to enforce peace in Xinjiang. Over

the longer term, nation-time in Xinjiang must progress for China to move forward toward the disappearance of ethnic identities and then backward toward ancient tradition. The role of ethnic minorities in China remains tightly controlled in narratives of a multicultural, non-Western nation since ancient times. Although official narratives of progress fix contingent national boundaries through time, this timeless continuity is fractured in its own celebrations of the transformation of Uighurs. China's leaders' paranoid projections outward insist that China must rise and reverse national humiliation. Yet these projections return to haunt and split China's national narrative. The "inferiority" and "backwardness" drawn from imperial encounters with the West are refracted inward toward ethnic minority identities, which are blamed as backward obstacles to China's greatness. Colonial binaries have been adapted for China's own traditional hierarchies (*huayi*) to conceptualize Uighurs as minorities in China's anticolonial international relations but as backward, threatening outsiders at home.

Official Chinese Occidentalism is a mirror image counter-narrative to Western Orientalism. It rejects Western cultural superiority but ultimately reinforces its master narrative of West/East and modernity/backwardness. This master narrative silences minorities in non-Western societies who disrupt this binary by representing their own contemporary life experiences as colonial. The reification of China's complex and multiple identities as "Confucian" in much mainstream literature on China helps invisibilize non-Han peoples. This reification also impedes broader intellectual understanding of China by concealing how domestic-international interplay drives the way China adapts and adapts to global social relations. This article offered one antidote to the naturalization of social hierarchies in China by showing how different peoples are categorized and differentiated in deeply intertwined, hierarchical visions of domestic and world order. The normative categorization of different peoples through colonial binaries shows that China's "life or death" struggle is to defeat hegemonism abroad and conceal its traces at home. The tragedy is not that China's categorization or treatment of ethnic minorities is exceptional or historically unparalleled. The tragedy is that an anticolonial state, with insight into Western failures to construct non-ethnocentric models of global relations, is repeating such similar mistakes.

Notes

1 The official translation of *minzu* (民族) is "ethnicity." However, following Harrell 1990, *minzu* is best untranslated because it does not entail self-identification.
2 These figures are rising: the US Department of Defense estimates suggest as many as three million—nearly a third of the Uighur population in China—and refers to them as concentration camps. See Stewart 2019.
3 I.e., Uighur Islamic traditions.

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