

MANCHESTER
1824

The University of Manchester

How Far Can Beijing's Treatment of Uyghurs
Be Called a Second Cultural Revolution?

Blogpost inspired by 'Though I Am Gone'

Course: UCIL22602

Student No.: 10966442

Word Count: 1607

INTRODUCTION

The Cultural Revolution in Mao's People's Republic of China (PRC) 1966-1977 involved the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) purging the nation of the bourgeois counter-revolutionary class that was displaced after the Civil War (Lieberthal, 2022, p. 1). Today, the CCP under Xi persecutes the Uyghur Muslim minority, mainly in Xinjiang Province. 200-380 re-education camps house more than one million Uyghurs who have been "arbitrarily detained... [as] one part of the government's crackdown" (Maizland, 2022, p. 1).

It is critical to identify whether the persecution of Uyghurs is a renewed Cultural Revolution due to the CCP's growing global influence. China's Gross Domestic Product (Purchasing Power Parity) surpassed the US' in 2014. It boasts the world's largest military (Allison, 2017, p. 9) and is expected to become "the world's next superpower" soon (Sengupta, 2003, p. 389). Therefore, the CCP's domestic ethical policies may have substantial implications for the global community in the future as Beijing's power extends, highlighting the importance of identifying the ideological nature of the Uyghurs' persecution.

Ellis' work will be consulted to determine the severity of the CCP's treatment of Uyghurs. Ellis' report compares the CCP's treatment of the Uyghurs with the Nazis' treatment of Jews. Considering the Holocaust's genocidal nature and its similarities with the Cultural Revolution, this report allows measurement of genocidal events, supporting the conclusion that the CCP's treatment of the Uyghurs, while different to the Cultural Revolution, reflects its genocidal nature in some manner.

‘THOUGH I AM GONE’

‘Though I Am Gone’ is a 2007 documentary examining the murder of teacher Bian by her students during the Cultural Revolution. Her students sought to join the Red Guard and regularly beat Bian until her death as they perceived her to be a counter-revolutionary. Among other middle-aged workers, she was one of many teachers killed during the Cultural Revolution who refused to flee urban areas due to their innocence and desire to avoid incrimination or familial disgrace.

This documentary highlights the CCP’s attitudes towards enemies of the state. Mao feared that counter-revolutionary sentiment would “dilute the authority of the political leader over time in favor [sic] of entrenched office-holders” of the pre-revolutionary era (Johnson, 1968, p. 3). Consequently, the Cultural Revolution was engineered to purge threats to the CCP’s authority, leading to the deaths of approximately 1.6 million people (Witte, 2019, p. 1). Teacher Bian forms part of this purged group.

This documentary foreshadows the CCP’s treatment of the Uyghur Muslims. The Uyghurs are China’s fourth largest ethnoreligious group, with a population of approximately 10 million in 2010 (University of Minnesota, 2014, p. 1), dominating the north-western Xinjiang Province. Since 2014, 200-380 re-education camps have functioned as detention centres to eliminate “threats to China’s territorial integrity, government, and population” (Maizland, 2022, p. 1), highlighting the CCP’s sustained intolerance for individual autonomy.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND THE UYGHUR MUSLIMS

The difference between the Cultural Revolution in the documentary and the Uyghur crisis is that the CCP publicised the Cultural Revolution to encourage public support for Mao and the purges. However, Xi's government reveals little about the west. The eastern Han majority are mainly unaware of the situation in Xinjiang, do not believe the Western accusations of genocide, or would deny them even if they saw the crisis first-hand (Tiezi, 2021, p. 1). The state's actions certify the belief that China has "little tolerance for anti-secularism and any thought outside the PRC Han-Chinese norm" (Ellis, 2022, p. 31), a norm troubled by the cultural difference and call for Xinjiang's independence from Beijing.

The persecution of Uyghurs is primarily confined to Xinjiang due to their demographic dominance, furthering their vulnerability and isolation. However, the confinement of the persecution to the region could have alternative motives aside from safeguarding the CCP's authority. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) marks Beijing's attempt to expand Eurasian trade networks. China's most valuable trading goods, coal and natural gas, are in Xinjiang Province (McBride, et al., 2023, p. 1).

Beijing's priority is to stabilise the region which involves "promoting economic development [...] where separatist violence has been on the upswing" (McBride, et al., 2023, p. 1). Xi seeks trade and economic security by removing Uyghurs and replacing them with Han workers, quelling separatist sentiment and increasing the economic output required for the BRI. The economic motives alone indicate that Uyghur persecution results from Xi's prioritisation of transcontinental economic expansion.

Ellis observes that "Uyghurs have not been excluded from the economy" and that "there have been attempts to bring Xinjiang *up to date* with the coastal regions of the nation" (Ellis, 2022, p. 35). While this may be the case, the CCP's priorities for expanding Xinjiang's economy are

to support the BRI, increase Beijing's economic income, and encourage Han Chinese to move west to work and displace Uyghurs. Economic output in the region is not desired for local benefit but for the Han and the state. This explains why, in a city needing a large labour force for the BRI, the CCP has detained one in eleven Uyghurs since 2016 (Ellis, 2022, p. 30), as it increases demand for a Han workforce to replace absent Uyghur workers.

Mao did not prioritise economic prosperity. Instead, the communalisation of goods and the growth of the socialist state were championed over wealth. The persecution of counter-revolutionaries, as discussed in 'Though I Am Gone', was motivated by younger individuals seeking to join the Red Guard, honouring themselves and their families and gaining the opportunity to pledge allegiance to Mao. The CCP targets the Uyghurs for two reasons: they threaten regional stability and are a roadblock to the BRI.

As a result, Beijing's activities today are not a direct renewal of the Cultural Revolution, but there are similarities. The West's condemnation of Beijing highlights similarities, with lawmakers marking the detention of Uyghurs as genocidal and an "‘industrial-scale' human rights abuse" (Reuters, 2021, p. 1). In response, the Chinese government has denied accusations of mistreating Uyghurs despite being accused of "serious human rights violations" at the United Nations (United Nations, 2022, p. 1).

Regardless of international responses to the Uyghur situation, the CCP continues engaging in genocide and ethnic cleansing. Whether this be to do with ethnic profiling or economic factors, Beijing's persecution of Uyghurs echoes the Cultural Revolution. There are similarities between the fear Uyghurs feel today and that which the perceived counter-revolutionaries felt in the 1960s and 1970s. Most apparent is the state's contempt for individual innocence and its belief that "anything that challenges this hegemony is treated as a threat to unity. As such, Uyghur Muslims' way of life and actions in Xinjiang do not meet the requirements of this ideal

image of China” (Ellis, 2022, p. 19), reflecting the treatment of the Uyghur population and the counter-revolutionaries during the Cultural Revolution as the state’s persecution of minorities is based on securing its authority.

THE ROLE OF ‘THOUGH I AM GONE’ IN ANALYSING EVENTS IN XINJIANG

In ‘Though I Am Gone’, Bian remained in Beijing because of her innocence and Party membership. Despite that, she died by her students, who suspected her harbouring anti-Maoist sentiment. However, her handbag revealed pro-revolutionary literature, including Mao’s ‘Little Red Book’, ‘On Self-cultivation of a Party Member’, ‘Never Forget Class Struggles’ and ‘The Soul-stirring Revolution’ (Though I Am Gone, 2007). Like many other victims of the Cultural Revolution, Bian was innocent of her accused crimes but was a victim of the state-organised purges.

Similarly, many detained Uyghurs are not separatists but are treated as dissident state members that threaten security. While the East Turkestan Independence Movement seeks independence in the Xinjiang Province, many Uyghurs live non-militantly, subordinate to Beijing. The East Turkestan Independence Movement makes up a fraction of the Uyghur population, and most Uyghurs have not engaged in separatism but are treated as members of an extremist group (Xu, et al., 2014, p. 1).

Beijing’s treatment of the minority does not directly reflect the Cultural Revolution, but there are striking similarities between stories from Uyghur Muslims and that told in ‘Though I Am Gone’. The atmosphere of fear and suspicion created by the state during the Cultural Revolution is renewed in Xinjiang for different reasons. Nonetheless, the persecution of a people for whatever reason will always echo the treatment of Mao’s enemies in the 1960s and 1970s.

CONCLUSION

There are similarities in how Uyghurs and counter-revolutionaries have been and continue to be treated by Beijing. However, differing motives exist for these examples of minority persecution. While both instances benefitted the CCP by safeguarding its authority and eliminating political threats, the BRI provides Xi's government with an additional economic incentive to remove or 're-educate' the Uyghurs, stabilising Xinjiang and increasing economic output and trade across Eurasia.

The international response condemns Beijing for human rights abuses, genocide and atrocities associated with the Cultural Revolution. In 'Though I Am Gone', the treatment of state enemies led to the murder or suicide of those persecuted. While this is not publicised in Xinjiang, and body counts are kept secretive by the CCP, there are suspected countless deaths among the Uyghurs detained in re-education camps by the state.

As China's influence grows internationally, Beijing's treatment of its population will likely spread to foreign peoples. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how Beijing's treatment of minority groups may have global impacts in the coming years. Documentaries like 'Though I Am Gone' prove valuable for assessing whether the Cultural Revolution is being repeated in renewed context today and whether it will be repeated on a global stage in the future.

REFERENCES

Allison, G., (2017). *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?*. (1st ed. London: Scribe).

Ellis, J. R., (2022). *A Comparative Analysis of the People's Republic of China and Its Treatment of Uyghur Muslims and Nazi Germany and Its Treatment of the Jewish People*, (Orlando: University of Central Florida).

Johnson, C., (1968). "China: The Cultural Revolution in Structural Perspective", *Asian Survey*, 8(1), pp. 1-15.

Lieberthal, K. G., (2022). "Cultural Revolution", [Online]. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cultural-Revolution>. [Accessed 22 April 2023].

Maizland, L., (2022). "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang", [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights#:~:text=and%20other%20sources,-.In%202020%2C%20researchers%20documented%20201%20reeducation%20camps,179%20detention%20centers%20and%20prisons>. [Accessed 22 April 2023].

McBride, J., Berman, N. & Chatzky, A., (2023). "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative", [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative#chapter-title-0-1>. [Accessed 23 April 2023].

Reuters, (2021). "UK parliament declares genocide in China's Xinjiang; Beijing condemns move", [Online]. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-parliament-declares-genocide-chinas-xinjiang-raises-pressure-johnson-2021-04-22/>. [Accessed 23 April 2023].

Sengupta, M., (2003). "Is China the Next Superpower?", *Defense & Security Analysis*, 19(4), pp. 389-404.

Though I Am Gone. (2007). [Film] Directed by Hu Jie. China: s.n.

Tiezi, S., (2021). “What Do Chinese People Think Is Happening in Xinjiang?”, [Online].

Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/what-do-chinese-people-think-is-happening-in-xinjiang/>. [Accessed 23 April 2023].

United Nations, (2022). *China responsible for ‘serious human rights violations’ in Xinjiang province: UN human rights report*. (New York: The United Nations).

University of Minnesota, (2014). “Ethnic Groups of the People’s Republic of China”, [Online]. Available at: <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/china-ethnicgroups.html>. [Accessed 23 April 2023].

Witte, M. D., (2019). “China’s Cultural Revolution was a power grab from within the government, not from without, Stanford sociologist finds”, [Online]. Available at: <https://news.stanford.edu/2019/10/29/violence-unfolded-chinas-cultural-revolution/>. [Accessed 23 April 2023].

Xu, B., Fletcher, H. & Bajoria, J., (2014). *The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)*, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations).

