
Analysis of the Uyghur-Chinese conflict in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)

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Introduction

There have been multiple reports on the mass incarceration of the Uyghurs in the People's Republic of China, especially in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). This paper seeks to analyse the Global and Local (China) perspectives and their justifications on the situation, while finally concluding with three findings that show the Global perspective to be stronger. First, the lack of liberty throughout China goes against Cosmopolitan principles. Second, Xinjiang brings huge economical and geographical value to China and thus, to the legacy of Xi Jinping. This provides reason for China to partake in the totalitarian control of Xinjiang, regardless of the means. Third, huge repositories of unbiased existing data seem to argue against China and conclude that China has indeed committed cultural genocide, while a lack of credible data from Chinese sources underplay the legitimacy of China's rebuttals to Western accusations.

Background of the Situation

Ever since the summer of 2017, reports of wide-scale imprisonment of Muslims in China's XUAR have surfaced. They provide findings that some 1 million minorities (Taipei Times, 2021), consisting of Uyghurs and other Muslims, have been detained in what China officially calls 'Vocational Education and Training Centres' (China Daily, 2019). These minority groups are sent to the internment camps and the Chinese state offers land and jobs to Han Chinese, enticing them to move and settle in Xinjiang. This policy of reocating Han Chinese to Uyghur-dominated regions has been in place since many years ago, but has sped up over the past few years, as seen when two million new Han Chinese recently relocated to Xinjiang (Zenz, 2020, p.3).

This has raised global concerns on the possible colonialism of the Uyghurs, and subsequently the eradication of Muslim culture in Xinjiang. Experts have reported that China is controlling the birth

rates of the Muslims in Xinjiang through forced sterilization (Zenz, 2020), and this has been further supported with personal recounts from ex-detained Uyghurs. They recall being pressured into taking birth control medication and being injected with fluids without concrete reason. They were later found to have become infertile (The Associated Press, 2020).

To fully understand the importance of Xinjiang to China, we need to understand the short history of Xinjiang and its geographical position. Xinjiang is strategically located in the west of China, near the borders and major frontier regions of China. It is the bridge between China and the countries in the Middle East and Central Asia. Ever since the early 1900s, it has been the target of major powers like the Soviet Union and was under its influence up till 1943 (Wang, 2007). When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, China seized the opportunity to regain control of Xinjiang and it is evident that Xinjiang is paramount in ensuring stability between China and its surrounding countries.

In 2013, China announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aimed at bringing over \$1 trillion dollars of investments to China (Hillman, 2018), while forming trade partnerships with multiple countries around the world. The BRI allows China to place investments into other markets to strengthen bilateral relations, or to even use them as leverage to increase their political power (Ma, 2019a). This will not be achieved if Xinjiang lacks peace because Xinjiang connects two-thirds of all the BRI land routes (Cho & Turner, 2020) and most of the projects related to the BRI must pass through Xinjiang. Coupled with Xinjiang's abundance of natural resources and large-scale industries like oil and mineral (Raza, 2019), Xinjiang is vital to China's prosperity and success.

The Uyghur oppression only came into public discourse during the recent years but has actually been around for many years prior. From the crackdown of the peaceful Ghulja Uyghur students rally in February 1997, to the infamous Urumqi riots in 2009, these events have been met with state violence, only to be countered with local violence, culminating in casualties and political unrest within the Xinjiang region (Finley, 2020; Kanat, 2012). China has labelled these events as terrorism and has vowed to eradicate this radicality from Xinjiang, resulting in 're-education centres' springing up to de-radicalise religious extremists, as China calls them.

Analysis of both the Global and China's perspective

Global perspective

In the US, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo has spoken out against birth control in Xinjiang, stating: "We call on the Chinese Communist Party to immediately end these horrific practices."

(Finley, 2020). Scholars like Adrian Zenz and Cornell University professor, Magnus Fiskesjo, have also taken a strong position that China has committed genocide and crimes against humanity. I find the Global perspective justified because of two reasons. First, we will compare the philosophical stance of Natural Law with the Global perspective. Second, we analyse it using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

According to the Natural Law Theory, everyone has inherent rights, conferred upon them not by legislation but by God, Nature, or reason. All laws should abide by Natural Law, and laws that do not follow Natural Law are deemed not to be 'True Law'. Cicero believed that Justice was not about opinion, but of fact, and that justice follows Natural Law. Natural Law can be derived from an individual's intrinsic habits, and holds true regardless of time, space, or person. Some examples could be the prohibition to kill, or to keep promises, and even respect private property.

China has violated Natural Law by forcefully preventing the promotion of life and birth, using contraceptives and prescribing surgeries (Zenz, 2020). Additionally, the leaked Nankai Report communicated that China uses forced labour transfers of the Uyghurs to dilute their population density in Xinjiang, because the high population density of Uyghurs threatens China's social stability (Zenz, 2021). Uyghurs are pressured into parting with their lands and transferred to new jobs far from home (Sudworth, 2021). This infringes on the property of the Uyghurs, and China has disrespected their inherent property rights. Even though the Uyghurs appear to be moving on their own accord, they are under high pressure to comply as going against the Chinese state would result in unlawful captures and potential harm to their loved ones (The Associated Press, 2020). China's laws and policies are just theoretical placeholders because they execute their laws based on force and opinion, as when Chinese Officials detain Uyghurs who they feel might commit future crimes, without concrete proof (BBC News, 2019). Hence, China's local laws do not correspond with Natural Law and are not justified, warranting the Global perspectives.

The UDHR, even though not legally binding, dictates that its articles apply to everyone and no one should perform acts aimed at the destruction of these rights. Additionally, China itself was a signatory of the UDHR and has thus implicitly agreed to its compliance. Article 9 of the UDHR states: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.", while Article 11 declares: "Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law in a public trial ...".

However, China has not followed through with the articles, and its pledge to uphold human rights. The leaked Karakax Papers document the mass surveillance and imprisonment of individuals from

the Karakax region, showing how Chinese officials detain Muslims on bases unrelated to crimes (Kang, 2020). The detainees are not offered fair trials and there is no tribunal system in place. They are detained and interrogated until they admit to their supposed wrongdoings (Bunin & Rickleton, 2018), as noticed from multiple interviews and testimonials of Uyghurs throughout the world, especially from the extensive Xinjiang Victims Database (Xinjiang victims database, 2021). There is compelling evidence that the Chinese state has been undermining the Human Rights of the Uyghurs and thus the Global perspective against China is found correct.

China's perspective

The main rationale behind the incarceration of Uyghurs, to China, is not unjustified. They opine that their every action is based on combatting terrorism and protecting their people. According to the Chinese, riots have been plaguing China and officials have always sought a means to ending the bloodshed. China's perspective on the 1990 Baren incident, 2009 Urumqi riots, and even the 2014 riots in southern Xinjiang pins the cause on Muslim extremists wanting to disrupt the peace in China. The vocational education and training centres were enacted to take measures against terrorism and radicalisation in Xinjiang (CGTN, 2021), with the aim of combatting the 'three evil forces': Separatism, extremism and terrorism (Hui, 2018).

The terrorist attacks resulted in countless amounts of lives lost as the 2014 riots in southern Xinjiang resulted in many Han Chinese being killed (Hu, 2021), while the Urumqi riots in 2009 left an estimated 197 dead and over 1,700 wounded. Additionally, Islamic separatists have influenced the community and carried out attacks against the Chinese (Green et al., 2007). These events disrupted the stability of China's society, with the Han Chinese becoming very unhappy with the government and wanting harsher punishments towards the Uyghurs (Wong & Yang, 2009). It is interesting to note that China has been supported by many countries who concur that terrorists in Xinjiang have caused widespread damage to the region (China Embassy, 2019). Terrorism and extremism, hence, have been deemed a grave challenge to China, and appropriate measures have been taken. This has proven to be successful because China notes zero large-scale terrorism in the past four years (CGTN, 2021). Hence, China's perspectives are justified as they have a duty to ensure that their people are kept safe.

Justifications for supporting the Global perspective

Lack of liberty in China

The most compelling factor undermining China's perspective is the current lack of liberty in China. China restricts its people tremendously and bars global media or freedom of speech and expression. This can be seen from multiple personal recounts and documentaries which show the intense scrutiny of people in China, and how even simple interviews and personal thoughts must be state-approved (Vice News, 2019). The Chinese state holds a totalitarian dictatorship over many fundamental rights under the guise of preventing the spread of misinformation and rumours. This is, according to John Stuart Mill: Wrong. Mill's main argument towards liberty holds true to the extent that granting such liberty does not result in extrinsic harm towards anyone else. He also rejects interference with the individual's thoughts or activity, especially so when he says:

“That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.”

China infringes on the rights of the people by forceful mass censorship in China, under the guise of maintaining peace and stability for the betterment of the people. This however, according to Mill, is not a legitimate justification because a particular law or policy being deemed beneficial does not justify the restriction on liberty; liberty can only be restricted when the individual poses harm to another.

Initially, China's actions might also seem justified because of the Social Contract Theory, which posits that individuals have consented, either explicitly or tacitly, to surrender some of their freedoms, in exchange for protection of their remaining rights and to reap other benefits of the state such as economic prowess. From the Crito where Socrates chooses to stay in Athens and implicitly subjects himself to the Social Contract Theory, the argument comes about that the people in China have also subjected themselves to this and have traded some of their freedoms to live in a safe and prosperous China. Officials use this stand to constantly defend genocide with an economic argument, that the whole of Xinjiang has enjoyed prosperity and a higher life expectancy, with the people being happy and content. (The Straits Times, 2021).

This, however, is but a straw man argument, or an *ignoratio elenchi a la* Aristotle. From the Crito:

You may take what is yours and go where you like, if we and the City do not please you. But whoever among you stays, recognizing the ways we render judgment and

govern the other affairs of the City, to him at that point we say that by his action he has entered agreement with us to do as we bid. (p. 125)

Many forget that the Social Contract Theory is built on liberty itself, especially the freedom to leave without coercion or pressure. With the Uyghurs, numerous recounts suggest that they either do not have the freedom of leaving China, or must return to China (Batke, 2017). They reap the economic benefits not because they want to, but because they must. Furthermore, this does not correspond with the UDHR, which declares the freedom to leave one's country a universal right. Overall, I find the lack of liberty oppressive and the Global perspective to be stronger.

Xinjiang's value to the Legacy of President Xi

President Xi has become a dominant force in Chinese politics, as seen when the 19th National Congress of the CPC formally brought in Xi Jinping Thought into the Chinese constitution. Xi is now considered an extremely powerful leader, comparable to the late Mao Zedong. The removal of the two-term limit of presidency in China has further heightened his position within Chinese history. Additionally, the Xi Jinping Thought was not only a great achievement to the Chinese people but an imperative in determining the continual success of governance in China. This concept of a common thinking, or a common 'China Dream' was important in invoking National pride in China, which the CCP has used to unify the people ever since the 19th Century (Hayes, 2019). The unification of the people is unquestionable, and Xi Jinping will do all he can to ensure stability and prevent fragmentation.

The leaked Xinjiang papers document Xi Jinping's constant reminders that the violence in Xinjiang is tarnishing the image of the CCP and inevitably, its strength. Without harsh leadership he argues, it might result in China failing like the Soviet Union (Ramzy & Buckley, 2019). Additionally, the BRI is at the heart of Xi Jinping's legacy and it would be detrimental to China if the project fell apart. Experts have stated that the cultural crackdown on the Uyghurs might be to protect the BRI project instead (Ma, 2019b). Without the guarantee of safety in Xinjiang, it puts such a heavy project at risk of abandonment, especially if terrorism and extremism re-arise in Xinjiang. Xi Jinping is on the path of leaving an impeccable legacy and Xinjiang, together with the success of the BRI, are critical factors contributing to his success. This leads to the discernment that there is a greater surreptitious meaning behind the crackdown on Xinjiang, other than that of 'terrorism' which the Chinese state constantly reiterates. Thus, I find China's perspective to be unconvincing enough.

Unbiased public data which argues against China

The strong informational control in China acts like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it provides totalitarian control of information flow in China, and gives power to the CCP due to their ability to control what the people see and know. On the other hand, it is detrimental to the CCP's success in convincing the world, through non-coercive means, that the rumours of China's genocide are false. The only publicly available media are those that the government wants to portray, such as Chinese-owned media sources like the China Global Television Network (CGTN), or the Global Times, a daily tabloid newspaper under the CCP that gives opinions on international issues with a rather huge tinge of Nationalism. On analysis, we see that most of their posts are in the interests of China, where they bash other Western countries and debunk claims made. While the Chinese claims provide due evidence and justifications, there lies a huge fraction of uncertainty in their sources because no detailed reports or statistics exist, and it is close to impossible to find any sources for corroboration. Hence, the tight infringement on informational freedom in China hugely undermines its ability to convince the world of truth in their claims.

Furthermore, there is extensive global proof against China, which China argues to be political tools fabricated by the US for control. The main argument by Chinese officials is that the Uyghurs who testified were unjust and did so out of fame or other economic reasons. The Chinese state media even gives their version of evidence, which debunks many claims made by these ex-incarcerated Uyghurs through the news tabloid (CGTN, 2021) or even their YouTube channel. However, this is firstly unsupported with unbiased evidence, and it also does not downplay the fact that there are many Uyghurs who have spoken up on this issue (Uyghur Pulse, 2020). The sheer number of testimonials against China more than satisfies the law of large numbers, where even if some of the testimonials were to be falsified, it is unlikely that all the testimonials contain no truth. Hence, I find China's perspectives and their evidence inconclusive of their innocence, and would find the global perspective stronger, even though it might be to an extent, exaggerated.

Conclusion

The analysis of this paper finds the Global Perspectives coherent, and in-line with philosophical principles. China's perspective, whilst justified, lacks compelling evidence, and is deemed to infringe on Human Rights. The research of this paper stems from a plethora of different sources, from in-class readings, first-person accounts and leaked Chinese Papers encapsulating the Global perspective, to Chinese-backed Global News websites and direct words from Chinese Officials which aid in elucidating China's perspective.

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One limitation of this paper is the absence of unbiased first-person recounts from Uyghurs currently in China. This is because of the extreme difficulty in conducting unbiased and unmonitored interviews on them. This is an avenue which Journalists and Academics should continue probing for further study – despite the strong Communist stand in China and the lack of ability to transfer non-pro-state information out of China.

(Words: 2974)

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