

Under the dragon's heel



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[Sreeram Chaulia](#) 6 May 2014

A daring terrorist attack at a railway station in Urumqi, the capital of China's restive Xinjiang region, while Chinese President Xi Jinping was touring the area last week is a blow to Beijing's strategy of using economic development as a magic wand to integrate disillusioned ethnic minorities.

People have spirits which cannot be satiated by infrastructure blitzes, modernisation drives and GDP growth. What is missing in the Chinese government's approach to dissatisfied minority groups such as the Uyghur people of Xinjiang is dignity, respect and equality of status with the majority Han people, who control the state apparatus and economic levers in this region.

Shining new intercity railway lines or oil pipelines offer scant solace for the Uyghurs — an Islamic people of Turkic origin — who have been pushed to the brink by decades of cultural genocide, military repression and ethnically biased GDP growth. The Chinese Communist Party claims that its massive investments in mineral-rich Xinjiang have yielded “remarkable improvement in people's lives”. The state's narrative is of a relentless march to progress in Xinjiang by transitioning from primordial farming and animal husbandry to an advanced “optimised economic structure” in which manufacturing and services are rapidly improving human welfare.

Beijing's top-down urbanisation and industrialisation in Xinjiang are part and parcel of its thrust to economically co-opt minority-populated western regions that never voluntarily accepted Chinese sovereignty. The Chinese government has been merciless in stamping this solution on the Uyghurs without their consultation. Authoritarian leaders of the Chinese Communist Party believe they have superior consciousness and revolutionary vision to decide what kind of lives and paths all Chinese people should lead, particularly ethnic minorities branded as Hsi-fan or barbarians in the Han worldview.

Sociologist Blaine Kaltman's *Under the Heel of the Dragon*, uncovers the depth of the Han majority's bias against Uyghurs as “lazy or too stupid”. Well-heeled Han migrants, who now dominate the upper echelons of society in Xinjiang through a state-enabled patronage system, hold condescending opinions of the local Uyghurs as bucolic and pre-modern hillbillies. Kaltman quotes Han Chinese, who now constitute 50 per cent or more of Xinjiang's population due to the state's demographic flooding policies, as saying that Uyghurs are “like little children” who “don't always know what is best for them” and who require “Han influence” to develop.

But Uyghurs take pride in their centuries-old Central Asian and Islamic culture, language, spiritual and architectural heritage, i.e. their collective identity. The Chinese government's economic juggernaut has crushed these markers of Uyghur distinction, exemplified by the official campaign to destroy the medieval quarters of Kashgar city that bore living testimony to the Silk Road history of Xinjiang. Eighty per cent of Kashgar's urban landscape has already been levelled and remade by Chinese construction crews to create modern condominiums and office buildings.

Many historic relics in Han areas of China have, of course, also been unceremoniously demolished (e.g. the legendary hutongs or traditional alleys in Beijing were bulldozed and erased amidst painful forcible evictions). But snatching away the symbols that remind minority groups of their traditions and values is far more devastating to their psyche as a colonised people under military occupation and surveillance.

The Chinese state boasts of policies for “preservation of ethnic cultures” in Xinjiang. But the lived reality in Xinjiang is one of intense frustration for Uyghurs and other smaller minority communities being forced to assimilate into President Xi's mono-ethnic vision of a “National Rejuvenation” where all citizens must “combine their personal dreams with the national dream and fulfil their obligations to the country.”

For Uyghurs and Tibetans, the list of their obligations towards masters in Beijing is long and onerous, leaving little room for rights. As second-class citizens who lack meaningful autonomy, they are not convinced about the alleged benefits of economic growth and prosperity that China is delivering to its peripheries.

If one were to closely inspect the economic gains argument that the Chinese government showcases for Xinjiang or Tibet, the cream of the cake has accrued to the state's trustworthy Han population who are seen as hated interlopers by the natives of these mountainous territories. The recent uptick in terrorist attacks inside Xinjiang as well as in distant places like Beijing and Kunming is a clear reflection of mounting grievances among the Uyghurs chafing under a totalitarian state.

After the Urumqi railway station terrorist attack, President Xi hinted at comprehending Uyghur anger by remarking that it is "essential to deeply understand Xinjiang separatism". The Chinese foreign ministry even acknowledged that the government is "paying attention to eliminating both the symptoms and root causes of terrorism." But far from genuine self-introspection about how the state's security and economic policies have fuelled resentments in Xinjiang, the government is as usual blaming "extreme religious thought" financed by exiled Uyghurs as the driving factor for the increasing incidence of terrorism.

Instead of realising that a harsh unitary state model bent on radical transformation of society is driving minorities to desperation, the Chinese government is warning of a "strike-first strategy" to clampdown harder with its mammoth security machine on the hapless Uyghur people.

What the Chinese state brands as senseless and unjustified terrorism has a basis in unequal socio-economic relations between the Han and the Uyghurs. Admitting it would undermine the Communist Party's hubristic self-definition as a civilising force guiding hitherto backward Xinjiang into the 21st century.

The "success" and "progress", which the party flaunts as its singular achievements are ironically its core weaknesses since they lack popular consent and legitimacy in Xinjiang and Tibet. Terrorism in China flows from a flawed economic development enterprise erected in minority regions by a chauvinistic state. As long as the Chinese Communist Party chooses to remain cynically blind to its own empire of racial discrimination and hierarchy, violent payback from minorities through terrorism or rebellion will keep recurring.

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