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This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Central Asian Survey, 38 (1), pp. 1-19.

The final definitive version is available online:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2018.1534801>

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# Colonisation with Chinese Characteristics: Politics of (In)Security in Xinjiang and Tibet<sup>1</sup>

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China as a victim rather than a proponent of modern colonialism is an essential myth that animates Chinese nationalism. The Chinese statist project of occupying, minoritising and securitising different ethno-national peoples of Central Asia such as Uyghurs and Tibetans, with their own claims to homelands, is a colonial project. Focusing on China's securitised and militarised rule in Xinjiang and Tibet, the article will argue that the most appropriate lens through which this can be understood is neither nation-building, nor internal colonialism but modern colonialism. It argues that the representation of Uyghurs and Tibetans as sources of insecurity not only legitimises state violence as a securitising practice but also serves contemporary Chinese colonial goals.

Keywords: Colonialism; Securitisation; China; Uyghurs; Xinjiang; Tibet; Nationalism

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank different anonymous referees, special issue editor and the journal editor for their feedback which allowed the paper to become more focused. I am also grateful to numerous Tibetan and Uyghur activists, students and scholars who agreed with my thesis about China as a colonial state whenever I presented it in one or the other form at conferences, protest marches or on social media.

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## **Securitisation Practices of China**

The emergence of China as a global power is predicated primarily on its rapid market-based economic growth for more than forty years. That it is a Communist Party-dominated state presiding over this large-scale market-oriented economic development raises questions about the legitimacy principle deployed to reconcile the purported ideal of ‘socialist democracy’ with ‘economic reforms’ – nationalism (see Gries 2005; Unger 1996; Zhao 2004). An essential ingredient of this nationalism is the idea of China as a past victim of colonialism, hence necessitating a strong and secure state in the present to avoid a repeat of victimisation. As Callahan has highlighted, the preferred narrative is of a Chinese civilisation as a nation that suffered from a ‘century of humiliation,’ but which after decades of revolutionary and other upheavals and conflicts is now ready to take its well-deserved position as a great power on the world stage (Callahan 2004). In order to do so, it must deal firmly with various threats to security and territorial integrity. The White Papers by the PRC’s Information Office of the State Council always insist on the need to safeguard ‘national unity and social stability’ from hostile outside forces (for example, Information Office 2009). Xinjiang and Tibet are specifically seen as vulnerable to security challenges for China.

Security is representation of danger, and danger is what the securitising state claims is thus and invests heavily in selling its representation as real, urgent and incontestable. The Chinese state and its (Han) majoritarian nationalism brands Uyghurs and Tibetans as sources of insecurity. Mass demonstrations in Tibet in 2008 and Xinjiang in 2009 as well as incidents of violent and non-violent protests are understood not as the results of legitimate grievances but as products of separatism, extremism and terrorism associated with Uyghur and Tibetan identities. This representation of Xinjiang

and Tibet as sites of existential threat legitimises massive investment in security apparatus and violence against inhabitants there. While agreeing with cognate scholarship inspired by the Copenhagen School of Securitisation that a good way to study China's militarised policies in Xinjiang (see Tredaniel and Lee 2017) and Tibet (Topgyal 2016) is through securitisation, the focus of this paper is not the specificities of securitisation but the wider explanation of why and how it is adopted, legitimised and normalised. Securitisation, this paper argues, is a product of the specific nature of nation-state building that China implements in Xinjiang and Tibet: China is a colonising nation-state. As China rises as a global power, its desire to remain strong and united goes hand in hand with anxiety about existential security threats coming from ethno-national peoples with their own narratives of homeland. Securitisation is integrally connected to modern Chinese colonial discourses around, and practices in, Xinjiang and Tibet.

When Chinese leaders, officials and media talk of the 'three evil forces' of extremism, separatism and terrorism, it is almost always in the context of Xinjiang and Tibet (see *China Daily* 2012). For instance, Barbour and Jones have pointed out how during the 2009 violence in Xinjiang, the state media represented the Uyghurs as the problematic Other through the tropes of 'the criminal, the terrorist, and the outside agitator' (2013: 95) and tapped into the worldwide discourse of the so-called 'war on terror' in order to justify further securitisation. Engaging with Securitisation literature, Cui and Li (2011) argue for moving away from normative 'positive-negative' debates when it comes to China's frontier security. However, Tredaniel and Lee make a convincing argument for the use of securitisation theory in the case of Xinjiang on the basis that 'colonial Sinicization has often been employed to consolidate Chinese control over the restive region and to safeguard Chinese border security' (2018: 190); they

highlight the continuity in this over the last century due to path-dependence. Kanat deploys the diversionary theory of war to assess how the ‘Uyghur minority was selected as the domestic other following September 11, 2001, in order to demonize Uyghur dissent groups in diaspora as well as to unify the Chinese people by using the perception of terrorist threat’ (Kanat 2012: 507). Similarly, Topgyal (2016, 2017) has highlighted the role of securitisation in Tibet. Taking the discussion further, this paper argues that this form of securitisation is a product of modern /contemporary Chinese colonialism in Xinjiang and Tibet.

Securitisation does not necessarily an asymmetry of power between the securitised and the one securitising. However, coloniality is about proprietorial control, dispossession, and chasm in power between the dominant securitiser and the dominated securitised. Thus, it is more productive to analyse China’s project in Tibet and Xinjiang as securitisation resulting from coloniality. The Politics of (In)Security of China in Xinjiang and Tibet are best understood as a colonial imperative marked by not only violence but also paternalism and the use of development as a mechanism of control. As I point out later, colonialism has paternalistic idea of the Other as inferior to the progressive Self built into it. The modernist, powerful Self has the duty and the right to mould the barbaric, backward Other into its own image. A study of China’s relation with Uyghurs and Tibetans shows how the latter are seen as inferior Other who can only develop under the guardianship of modern Chinese state and through the agency of advanced Han Chinese people. Investments in the homelands of Uyghurs and Tibetans are made to colonise the landscape and yet they are represented as charity for which the locals should be grateful. Local identities are securitised and if they openly challenge the move toward cultural assimilationism or resist economic marginalisation or challenge political erasure, they are deemed ripe for mass ‘political re-education’ (see

Zenz 2018), 'reform through labour' or even mass incarceration. The specificity of Uyghur and Tibetan experiences under China thus highlights the need to understand securitisation of identities as resulting from colonising nature of the nation-state. This paper will situate its argument within the context of debate in Western scholarship over the 'minority question' in China and argue that the most appropriate way to understand the politics of (in)security in Xinjiang and Tibet is neither as ethnic relations nor as internal colonialism but resulting from contemporary colonisation.

### **The Partial Silences of Western Scholarship**

Contrary to the Sinophobic as well as Sinophilic reduction of China to Confucian values in Western media, the country is a site of plurality, and contestation with and within borderlands plays an important role in generating fear of instability (see Duara 2005; Saxer and Zhang 2014, Smith Finley 2013). While categories such as 'Han' are themselves contested (Joniak-Lüthi 2015; Mullaney et al 2012) and all ethno-nationalist identities are constructed, it would be problematic to assert that all voices matter equally in China.

As Jacobs points out, 'within this polyphony of voices, some speakers were capable of speaking louder than others' (Jacobs 2008: 586). Some voices are allowed to be heard while others are suppressed. For example, a Han Chinese Communist party leader pontificating in public about the effectiveness of state minority policy would be heard louder within China than an incarcerated Uyghur dissident intellectual. During the 2009 unrest in Xinjiang, protests by Uyghurs were met by a massive police crackdown while protests by Han led only (and not immediately) to the removal of senior government officials. The representation of Uyghurs/Tibetans as separatists or terrorists

has direct bearing on the life and livelihood of individual Uyghurs/Tibetans, while representation by Uyghurs/Tibetans of the Han majority as culturally threatening has very little significance for the majority. The security of the state is closely aligned to the security of the majority; Cliff (2012) highlights this in the case of Xinjiang. It is crucial to keep in mind these asymmetries while appreciating pluralities. The asymmetries disproportionately affect those considered minorities for they carry the burden of being part of the nation while also being seen as subservient. As Gladney highlights, the ‘rise in nationalist rhetoric in China may have the greatest implications for its internal colonial others, its subaltern subjects’ (Gladney 2004: 367).

What is it about Xinjiang and Tibet that makes them sites of greater securitisation and militarization? One conspicuous fact affecting Chinese national security is the territory-population disconnect. Han Chinese, the majority and the dominant ethno-national people, occupy only a portion of territory of the modern Chinese state even as a significant part of the territory lies in the homelands of ethno-national peoples including Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongols, many of whom contest the reduction of their status to being mere minorities within China. The disconnect between cartographic desires and the historical-cultural reality of Han Chinese nationalism was obvious from the very beginning of the twentieth century and has been a constant/significant source of insecurity for the Chinese state. The process of transformation of imperial China into a nation-state had already started with the Late Qing (see Cosmo 1998; Leibold 2007; Perdue 2005) and continued with the Nationalists, Republicans and Communists. This explains Sun Yat Sen’s formulation of the five fingers of the Chinese nation – Han, Hui (the term then subsuming all Muslim peoples), Tibetan, Mongol and Manchu – and subsequent formulation of nationality policies by the Communists. Creating a unitary and stable single nation-state involved a

mixing of politics of recognition of nationalities for the purpose of managing difference, and a politics of securitisation and repression for the purpose of de-nationalising and depoliticising difference (see Radnitz and Roberts 2013 for a discussion in the context of Xinjiang). Rather than accept protests and demands from Uyghurs/Tibetans as political, the state invariably securitises them as a threat to the stability of the nation's body politic. While some scholars have argued that this securitisation generates more grievances (Holdstock 2015) and brings neither human security for the people affected nor stability for the state (Clarke 2010; Steele and Kuo 2007), there remains insufficient analysis of why China does what it does. Even when various explanations are provided, the "C" word is missing for the authors tend to take for granted the legitimacy of the Chinese nation-state. For instance, Purbrick studies China's 'counter-terrorist efforts' as part of 'wider motivations relating to domestic stability, foreign policy, geo-political relations, economic growth, and nationalism' (Purbrick 2017: 236).

The field of China studies has sometimes eschewed or under-emphasised the politics of recognition as well as suppression in what are now deemed 'minority areas' or 'peripheral areas,' even though these areas are territorially massive. However, there has been interesting research on minorities in China that has highlighted that without understanding the 'minority question', we cannot understand how the nation-state project functions (see Blum 2002; Bulag 2002; Dikotter 1992; Dreyer 1976; Gladney 1994, 2004; Harrell 1994; Heberer 1989; Jacobs 2016; Leibold 2013; Oakes 2000; Schein 1997; Mackerras 2003). As Hillman and Henfry put it: 'Ethnic minorities entered the national imagination as the primitive Other against which China's modern national identity could be constructed' (2006: 253).

Who decides who is a minority and who is not? What institutional and definitional powers are being implemented in the process of naming, recognising,



controlling, and/or domesticating people as minorities? In the case of Uyghurs and Tibetans, this question becomes even more acute because there is a strong and visible resistance on the part of Uyghurs (see Bovingdon 2004, 2010; Hillman and Tuttle 2016; Jacobs 2016; Smith Finley 2013; Starr 2004) and Tibetans (Khetsin 2009; Smith 2009; Topgyal 2016) against the Chinese nation-state project that renders them a perceived security threat. While the resistance takes various forms, some violent, some non-violent, some demanding independence, some genuine autonomy, and some implementation of rights enshrined in law, there is an overwhelming sense of ethno-nationalist Self whose homeland is under control of the Han Chinese Other (see various reports by Uyghur Human Rights Project n.d.; Central Tibetan Administration n.d.; International Campaign for Tibet n.d.; Tibet Justice n.d.;).

Studying Uyghurs and Tibetans living under Chinese control as ethnic or national minorities as many scholars do is accepting the terms of debate set by the Chinese state. Should we see Uyghurs as a minority because this is what the Chinese nation-state demands, or do we see them as a stateless nation living under alien occupation because this is how many Uyghurs experience their identity? If as scholars we maintain neutrality and avoid siding with nationalist claims made by Tibetans, are we not adopting a double standard if we at the same time fail to interrogate the Chinese nation-state's description of them as 'minorities'? This paper adopts a position that is critical of normative nation-statism, where the language of the nation-state becomes an authoritative determinant of scholarship. Further, it privileges an ethic of subversion where state claims of authority are read against the grain. An important area where we can subvert the dominant nation-statist narrative is where colonialism is seen as something through which China was victimised but not as something that China practices. Chinese politics of representing Uyghurs and Tibetans as sources of

insecurity to the nation-state's body politic even though it is the nation-state itself that renders the lives of individual Uyghurs and Tibetans insecure is a product of contemporary Chinese colonialism.

Thus, the paper will challenge views that posit colonialism in China as a thing of the past. For example, Goodman and Goodman completely ignore China's own colonial politics even as they discuss multiple cases of contemporary colonialism in *Twentieth-century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday, and the World* (Goodman and Goodman 2012). Other works on China (and India) take for granted the 'dismantling of the colonial structures' (Thampi 2005: 18), even as it is clear that the Chinese state uses anti-imperialist narratives to exercise and maximize its own colonial practice, in the garb of securitised modern nation-statist sovereignty.

Even when the asymmetry of power between the Chinese state and Uyghurs and Tibetans is noted by scholars, qualifiers are often deployed to cushion the fact of coloniality. Barry Sautman's writings illustrate this most starkly (Sautman 2006a, 2006b, 2000), while David Goodman's writing on China's Western Development strategy may also come across as an apology for colonialism.

Even outside the PRC the negative connotations necessarily mask any more positive aspects of colonialism and colonisation. Both individually and socially colonialism may bring elements of social and economic improvement to the periphery, regardless of the relationship to the core and the extent to which the political centre dominates. The greater provision of educational opportunities is, in general, one obvious way in which colonial powers have contributed to the development of the periphery, even if this may often be regarded as a forced socialisation into the values and society of the core and remains resented (Goodman 2004: 328).

Yet there are scholars who have highlighted the asymmetries in the minoritisation endeavours of the Chinese state and Chinese nationalism. They have

argued that cultural representations of ethnic minorities are not only gendered and sexualised but also akin to orientalism. For example, Schein argues for the adoption of the phrase “*internal orientalism*” to describe a relation between imaging and cultural/political domination that takes place inter-ethnically within China’ (Schein 1997: 73). This asymmetry of cultural power allows for recognition of the political significance of this asymmetry. Scholars such as Gladney (1998) use the concept of internal colonialism to understand this asymmetry, while more recently Anand has used the concept of ‘Postcolonial Informal Empires’ (2012) and Jacobs that of ‘national empire’ (2016).

### **Securitisation as a Result of Internal Colonialism**

Could the securitisation of Uyghurs and Tibetans in the Chinese nationalist imaginary be understood as resulting from the phenomenon of internal colonialism that allows us to recognize both China’s sovereignty and the asymmetry of power? The notion of internal colonialism has been used by various Marxist scholars to ‘explain the underdevelopment of certain geographical regions’ (Moses 2008: 23; see also Gouldner 1978 and Hind 1984). It is also used to understand the discourses and practices through which the modern nation-state has managed to create political hegemony over territories and populations that in the past had disputed and conflictual relations with the core. Using the example of Russia and the Central Asian republics under the USSR, Loring points out

Effectively, Central Asia went from being an “overseas” colony, ruled from afar by the tsarist government, to being an internal colony of the Soviet state. Economic integration into the Soviet Union thereby created a new, more comprehensively subordinate relationship between center and periphery, one that was qualitatively different and far more pervasive than that of the tsarist era (Loring 2014: 80).

This experience is similar to that of Uyghurs and Tibetans as the loose links from the days of the Qing Empire has converted into an ever-intensifying subordination under the modern Chinese state.

While some scholars used the concept of internal colonialism to understand the asymmetry between different ethnic/racial communities (Allen 2005 and Blauner 1972 used this in the context of African Americans in the USA), others used it to explain the asymmetry between different ethnic/racial communities located in particular regions, often on the periphery of the state. Chavez emphasizes this by arguing that ‘internal colonialism seeks to explain the subordinate status of a racial or ethnic group in its own homeland within the boundaries of a larger state dominated by a different people’ (Chavez 2011: 786). For colonialism to go beyond a term used to express asymmetry of power, it must retain a territorial-regional dimension (for various studies in the context of different places including Scotland, Palestine, Bangladesh, and so on, see Casanova 1965; Das 1978; Hechter 1975, 1979; Hechter and Levi 1979; Murphy 1991). Practices of racialisation, securitisation, discrimination and violence that such studies identified as integral to internal colonialism are very much present in the cases of Chinese rule over Uyghurs and Tibetans.

There are scholars who have argued that the Chinese nation-state project in Xinjiang and Tibet could be seen as internal colonialism. While Gladney (1998) has developed this argument in detail for Xinjiang, no similarly detailed scholarly work exists for Tibet. After Xinjiang was occupied by the communist Chinese state in what was presented as a ‘peaceful liberation’, Uyghurs were minoritised by the Chinese state in 1950 as the Uyghur nationality, while the region was recognised as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955. As Gladney points out:

Chinese practice of “integration through immigration” has meant the in-migration of Han Chinese since the 1950s, with populations increasing from an estimated 5 percent in 1940 to 38 percent in 1990. The expropriation of Xinjiang's vast mineral and petrochemical resources, with processing of petroleum products in the interior, primarily Lanzhou, further fits the internal colonialism model (Gladney 1998: 4).

So, why use the term ‘internal colonialism’ or ‘internal orientalism’? What does the qualifier ‘internal’ signify? It illustrates the hold of normative nation-statism as we take for granted what the State claims and what the international system of sovereign states dictates and allows. The orientalist and colonialist attitudes of the Han-Chinese nationalist state toward Uyghurs, Tibetans, and other ethnonational peoples can be qualified as ‘internal’ only if we accept the claim of that State to be legitimately ruling these people. If on the other hand we contest that claim by privileging the views of those being colonised and orientalised, and who see the State as occupying their homelands, we will realise that there is nothing internal about such processes. The Internal Colonialism debate assumes the naturalisation of the nation-state even when scholars are looking at self-evidently different experiences. The question therefore is not whether Xinjiang or Tibet are experiencing internal colonialism, but whether or not the colonialism they are experiencing requires the qualifier ‘internal,’ thus indirectly accepting the legitimacy of the process of colonisation.

According to Hind, the internal colonialism ‘approach usually excludes that feature of traditional views of colonisation which assumes geographical separation [but includes] such characteristics of conventional colonialism as political subjection, economic exploitation, cultural domination, and racial conflict’ (Hind 1984: 552). However, Uyghurs and Tibetans have their own strong sense of homeland and do perceive that homeland as geographically separate from Han Chinese territories seen as ‘China proper’ or ‘Inner China’. Even historically, when Tibetans did not operate on the

basis of modernist discrete sovereignty and had a patron-priest relation with empires based in China (*mchod yon*; see Klieger 1992), there remained a clear sense of Tibet being different from China (Anand 2009; Halper and Halper 2014; Shakya 1999; Wolff 2010). While Uyghur identity has been contested, the origin and strengthening of modern Uyghur national identity have long antecedents in various processes in the Uyghur homeland, as Tursun points out (2018). I would therefore argue that the use of the qualifier ‘internal’ distracts from the contemporary colonial discourses and practices China deploys to legitimize its occupation and control. The representation of Uyghur and Tibetan voices as ‘separatist’ or ‘extremist’ or ‘terrorist’ (especially in the case of the Uyghurs) and thus a source of insecurity vis-à-vis the ‘core interests’ of the nation-state bolsters the practice of heavy securitisation and militarization and should be understood as resulting from this colonialism.

While differentiating between domestic colonialism/imperialism and international colonialism/imperialism in terms of whether the domination occurs within the ‘confines of a recognised autonomous political unit (polity)’ or is ‘the control of one political unit over another’, Horvath acknowledges this problem through the example of Tibet, writing that Tibet ‘*belongs to China, according to the Chinese*’ (Horvath 1972: 48, emphasis original). In this paper, by identifying certain aspects of Chinese governance of Xinjiang and Tibet, I will argue that the best framework within which to understand a governance marked by heavy militarisation, securitisation and asymmetry of power is neither minoritisation nor internal colonialism but full-fledged modern colonialism of the kind that European powers imposed on many parts of the world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### **Contemporary Chinese Colonialism**

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines colonialism as ‘a broad concept that refers to the project of *European* political domination from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries that ended with the national liberation movements of the 1960s’ (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2012, emphasis added). There is no explanation for why it is only Europeans who are seen as colonialist. In fact, it is the hegemony of Marxist thinking that associates imperialism and colonialism with stages of capitalism that is primarily responsible for this ethnocentric view that only Europeans are capable of colonising and being fountainheads of capitalism (Anand 2012). In practice, colonialism refers to ‘systems of rule by one group over another, where the first claims the right (a “right” usually established by conquest) to exercise exclusive sovereignty over the second and to shape its destiny’ (Howe 2002: 30-31). If we adopt this idea, then there is nothing peculiarly Western/European about this.

Colonialism ‘is not just any relationship between masters and servants, but one in which an entire society is robbed of its historical line of development, *externally manipulated* and transformed according to the needs and interests of the colonial rulers’ (Osterhammel 1997: 15, emphasis added). When we study Chinese rule over Xinjiang and Tibet, we see that it fits the definition fully. The militarised security discourse that China uses to bolster this rule stems from the colonial nature of the state. Colonialism renders the colonised inferior, dangerous and always already suspicious, thus a subject that must be securitised, domesticated, controlled or eliminated.

### ***Paternalistic Control***

At the very basic level, colonialism is about an asymmetry of power where one people claims the moral right and responsibility to rule and govern other peoples: ‘A

*colony* is a new political organisation created by invasion (conquest and/or settlement colonisation)’ while the imperial center ‘claims exclusive rights or “possession” of the colony’ (Osterhammel 1997: 10). While there may be economic, strategic, political and other reasons behind this rule, the basic principle deployed is one of proprietorial civilising mission (for a discussion on this in the context of China, see Harrell 1994). Writing during the Cultural Revolution, by when Han migration to Xinjiang was already high (Dillon 1995) but Uyghurs were still a clear majority, Wiens had this to say: ‘Although China has yet to assimilate the inhabitants of the Sinkiang region into her national culture, Han China has had proprietary relations with parts of it for over 2,000 years’ (Wiens 1966: 68; this proprietorial relations is severely contested by Uyghur nationalists). Indeed, the language of the state in Xinjiang and Tibet has always been one of proprietorship. While from late nineteenth century (Xinjiang, “The New Dominion” was created as a province of Qing Empire in 1884), these areas were seen as sites of contestation, in recent decades, as the ideology of socialism has de facto become less important, the language of securitisation of the nation in its fight against separatism has become dominant. It is in this context that political activism and autonomous cultural assertion by Uyghurs and Tibetans are represented as supporting separatism and thus as posing a challenge to China’s security and stability (see Clarke 2007; Jing Yu 2016; Kerr and Swinton 2008; Topgyal 2016).

Since the formation of People’s Republic of China in 1949, colonialist paternalism has marked the Chinese communist approach toward Xinjiang and Tibet. Various White Papers put forward by the Chinese Government have emphasised the right, duty and responsibility of the Chinese state to govern with absolute control. For instance, the White Paper on Xinjiang from 2003 asserts that ‘since the Han Dynasty established the Western Regions Frontier Command in Xinjiang in 60 B.C., the Chinese



central governments of all historical periods exercised military and administrative jurisdiction over Xinjiang’ (Information Office 2003). The language ascribed to ‘patriotic Uyghurs’ in different government publications is one of ‘gratitude’ to the Chinese nation. Similarly, with the Seventeen Point Agreement signed on 23 May 1951, it is declared that ‘Tibet became free from imperialist rule and returned to the family of the Chinese nation’ (Luo Li 2008: 117). China presents its occupation of Tibet as a benign ‘liberation’, with Clause 1 of the Seventeen Point Agreement that forced the traditional Tibetan state to accept Chinese sovereignty stipulating that ‘the Tibetan people shall return to the family of the motherland – the People’s Republic of China’ (Mackerras 2003: 23). From 1949 in the case of Uyghurs, and 1951 in the case of Tibetans, until today, the language of liberation remains dominant, and all scholarly, media, public diplomacy and government reports in China use this term consistently. Indeed, as Gladney suggests, given public criticism in other parts of the world over China’s treatment of Tibet, ‘it is not surprising that Tibetans are often represented as the most willing subjects of China’s “democratic liberation”’ (Gladney 1994: 96). According to PRC state discourse, Uyghurs and Tibetans were ‘liberated’ by China. But, ‘liberated’ from whom?

The ruler is there to ‘liberate’ and ‘help’ the ruled because the ruled are not fit to govern themselves. This involves not only military and political control but also unquestioned paternalism (see Harrell 1994 on the infantilisation of people in the peripheries). Colonial perceptions and relations can take diverse forms including ‘gentle exoticism as well as racist settler violence’ (Thomas 1994: 17). In the context of Xinjiang, we witnessed different reactions of the Chinese state to Han and Uyghur violence during the 2009 Ürümqi riots – while it cracked down heavily against the Uyghurs on 5 July, in the initial hours of 7 July the PLA stood by and watched as Han

settlers committed retaliatory violence (see Smith Finley 2011). Since the 1950s, Tibet has witnessed mass protests and uprisings from time to time against Chinese rule, the most recent one in 2008, as well as various other forms of protest including, recently, self-immolation (Whalen-Bridge 2015). These incidents are put down with heavy state violence while the rhetoric of ‘happy Tibetans eternally grateful to the Chinese government for liberating them’ continues. Similarly, every aspect of Uyghur social, religious, cultural and political life is heavily controlled and yet Uyghurs are represented as grateful to the Chinese nation-state (Uyghur Human Rights Project 2012).

In this way, the liberation of ‘grateful’ subjects goes hand in hand with the militarised securitisation of the occupied territories and violent suppression of occupied people in Xinjiang and Tibet. The very language of ‘liberation,’ as deployed by the Communist party in China, is colonialist-imperialist in ethos because it takes away the agency of those purportedly liberated to decide for themselves, and invests that agency in a Party that consists primarily of the occupier, the Han Chinese. With time, and especially since mass protests in 2008 in Tibet and in 2009 in Xinjiang, this militarisation and securitisation has increased in intensity. Colonialism involves territorial and political control by a foreign power. The nature and extent of this control may vary over time and between places, but the ultimate power to decide the fate of the people lies in the hands of the foreign power. It is the Chinese state and not the Uyghur or Tibetan people who have the right to decide the territorial boundaries and political system under which they have to live.

In the PRC, the regional autonomy system is a mechanism of governance, not a tool of liberation for ‘minority nationalities’. For instance, Uyghur- and Tibetan-populated regions are ostensibly granted autonomy under Nationality laws in China, and

yet there is no Uyghur or Tibetan in a senior position in the Chinese Communist Party. Since it is the Party and not the government administration that is the most powerful institution, the ‘autonomy’ system offers no genuine sharing of political power at a higher level (for a discussion on how the autonomy system works in Xinjiang, see Bovingdon 2004; Smith Finley 2011: 87).

Zhu Weiqun, until recently the Vice President and General Secretary of the China Association for the Preservation and Development of Tibetan Culture, observed in the preface to a coffee table book: ‘These days, she [Tibet] is a treasured *property* of China as well as [of] human civilisation’ (Wang Miao and Liu Yang 2005: 6, emphasis added). This is not the personal view of one senior official but rather reflects the overall approach of the state. For instance, one of the first official PRC White Papers on Tibet was entitled *Tibet – Its Ownership and Human Rights Situation* (Information Office 1992). A cursory survey of newspapers, magazines and TV programmes representing Chinese leadership over Tibetans illustrates the imagery of grateful Tibetans and benign Chinese (see also Blum 2002). Tibetans are never seen as partners or as equals in ‘China’s Tibet’ but always as ‘young brother,’ and China’s policies toward minority nationalities has this paternalism enshrined. Similar is the case with the representation and treatment of Uyghurs. As Yeh argues, within the familial bond between ‘brother’ nationalities lies ‘the unchallengeable premise of Han superiority over minority groups, and the identification of the Han ‘older brother’ with China (2014: 14). Further, Howland has rightly pointed out:

In a 1954 address to the First National People's Congress, Liu Shaoqi ... contended [that the minority nationalities] were unable to progress without the help of their Han brothers. Thus, the state had a duty to send Han cadres to work in the minority areas, where they would serve and assist the minority nationalities to consolidate their internal unity and political maturity, until the time when they could assume leadership in the area (Liu Shaoqi, [1954] (Howland 2011: 186).

In this way, paternalistic governance structures go hand in hand with the infantilisation and exoticisation of Uyghurs, Tibetans and other ethnonational people in manners that render them apparently incapable of governing themselves (see Blum 2001; Harrell 1994; Heberer 2001; Makley 2002). During dinner conversation with senior officials in Lhasa in October 2010, I was told by the senior-most official, a Han Chinese who had lived in Tibet for more than two decades without learning a word of Tibetan, that the problem with Tibetans was that they were ‘too religious’ and did not know what was best for them, and, hence, without the guidance of central government, they would fail to deal with modernity; Smith Finley (2013) refers to similar attitude of Han officials in Xinjiang. This resonates with what Osterhammel argues is a core feature of colonialism:

The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonised people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonised population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and their ordained mandate to rule (Osterhammel 1997: 16-17).

Therefore, even as people in the militarised territories of Xinjiang and Tibet come under increasingly stringent control and their lives are intensively securitised, the ‘autonomous’ local governments always reiterate their gratitude toward Beijing for its bestowal of development and enlightened rule. The late Fei Xiaotong, a prominent social anthropologist in China, spoke of how ‘as the national minorities generally are inferior to the Han in the level of culture and technology indispensable for the development of modern industry.... Our principle is for the better developed groups to help the underdeveloped ones by furnishing economic and cultural aids’ (Fei 1989, in Gladney 1994: 100). The idea of China as the modernising force in Xinjiang and Tibet brings the communist doctrine of a vanguard party bringing light to the oppressed living

under a false consciousness together with the capitalist notion of progress through the destruction of the traditional. This fusion takes place within the broader framework of a colonising nation-statism, which naturalises the project of this state to colonise territories it claims and controls without the consent of the people inhabiting them, and justifies the militarisation and securitisation of ethno-national lives that are seen as separatist and thus threatening. The language of China in Xinjiang and Tibet thus is the language of colonial paternalism.

While paternalism and political and economic control are all component parts of colonialism, in the end the power is wielded through violence (see Khetsun 2009; Pemba 2017; Shokdung 2016). For instance, the story of the ‘liberation’ of Tibet began not with some imaginary revolutionary uprising amongst Tibetans against their feudal lords but when the PLA defeated the Tibetan army, leaving the traditional Lamaist state with no option other than to sign an Agreement accepting Chinese sovereignty (Shakya 1999). Military force has always been at the heart of the liberation project. The public display of military might and security prowess through various drills conducted in towns of Xinjiang and Tibet in recent years is meant to send a strong message to the restive population that the state’s might is unassailable.

Uprisings and protests by both Uyghurs (Kerr and O’Brien 2011; Swinton 2008; Zenz and Leibold 2017) and Tibetans (see Jianglin Li 2016) have always been suppressed; moreover, the brutality of suppression has increased in recent years. The symbol of Chinese occupation is not only the PRC flag flying over many monuments and even private houses in Uyghur and Tibetan towns, or the ubiquitous statues of Mao Zedong looming in municipal squares but the presence of snipers, soldiers, Public Security Bureau police, secret police, surveillance equipment and informers. The use of torture is well reported by human rights organisations.

Given the centrality of religion to both Uyghur and Tibetan ethno-nationalism, it is no surprise that China invests increasingly heavily in controlling religious institutions and practices. This includes surveillance and tight control over monasteries, mosques, and seminaries as well as over the socio-cultural practices of the people. In recent times, this has even extended to a desire to control the institution of reincarnation in Tibet (Anand 2010) and to decide whether or not Uyghur Muslims wear a veil, grow a beard, or fast during Ramadan (BBC 2017).

### *The 'Gift of Progress'*

An essential part of a colonisation project is the exploitation of resources of the colonised place, the imposition of a development model that makes the people there more connected to and dependent on the colonisers, and at the same time the repeated use of a rhetoric of backwardness, where the colonised is represented as inferior and requiring the benign economic dominance of the coloniser. This politics of development goes hand in hand with the notion of civilising mission. As Chinese dissident Wang Lixiong points out, the 'feeling of cultural superiority is common among Chinese officials governing Tibet' (Wang and Shakya 2009: 125).

Today, Xinjiang and Tibet are amongst the poorer regions dependent on handouts from Beijing in the form of economic subsidies. Rapid economic development is taking place, but Uyghurs and Tibetans are seen as having low efficiency and productivity, and discrimination and inequalities in the labour market are rife (Fischer 2013). According to Han scholars writing as recently as the last decade: 'Tibet has to make great efforts to improve the obstacles of low population quality and inadequate human capital for economic development' (China Tibetology Research Centre 2009: 75). Similarly, a public diplomacy publication from Beijing specifies:

The economic foundation in Tibet is extremely backward and productivity is extremely low, as a result of its particular geological, natural and historic conditions. In the last five decades, the Central Government has provided tremendous support to develop the economy in Tibet, to a degree that no other province or autonomous region in the country can be compared (Luo Li 2008: 105).

The development lauded above is a colonial form of development, whose primary motive is not to empower Tibetans but to make them dependent on the Chinese state and to encourage migration of Han Chinese into Xinjiang and Tibet. In this sense, rapid economic growth contributes further to ethnic tensions by adding economic inequality and exclusion to the list of discriminations Uyghurs and Tibetans face (see Cao 2010; Wu and Song 2014). Mining, oil and natural gas exploitation, and environmental destruction are also an integral part of this top-down development (Buckley 2012; Lafitte 2013).

Today, infrastructure development in Xinjiang and Tibet, presented as ‘modernisation,’ is geared primarily toward strengthening the political control of China (Dreyer 2003). Railway construction created jobs mostly for Han workers, while railways on the ‘rooftop of the world’ are facilitating large-scale migration of Han Chinese into Tibetan towns and cities. While ethnic Tibetans from outside the TAR cannot travel easily into Tibet and face restrictions and surveillance, state incentives exist for non-Tibetans to travel to Tibet and even settle there. Railways, road building and airports are also needed to facilitate military movement. Since the border with India remains unresolved and disputed, there remains a heavy militarisation in the Himalayas. In the case of Xinjiang, militarised development is conspicuous through the overwhelming presence of the para-military organisation, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), otherwise known as the *bingtuan* (Bequelin 2000). The XPCC is not only a driver of economic sustainability but also of territorial security and

‘ethnic frontier governance’ (Zhu and Blachford 2016) and thus constitutes a major ‘institution for the ethnic Han (Chinese) colonisation of Xinjiang’ (Seymour 2000).

One major step taken by the Chinese government after the unrest of 2009 was to speed up the process of development, especially in southern Xinjiang, which still remains predominantly Uyghur-populated. Local officials never shy away from equating development with security. For instance, Nur Bekri, an ethnic Uyghur deputy to the National People’s Congress said in 2012: ‘While keeping an eye on the security, Xinjiang will also speed up to build itself into a channel for China’s energy and resources security and an important portal for China’s opening up westward’ (*China Daily* 2012). Following the 2009 violent protests in Xinjiang, the Chinese government renewed investment especially in southern parts of Xinjiang that were more Uyghur-dominated through the pairing of different towns in the region with “more developed” provinces such as Shandong. The language, practices and policies involved in this twinning project all showed that development was connected to securitisation (see Uyghur Human Rights Project 2012).

Colonisation involves demographic transformation through population transfer and infrastructure development, as well as social transformation, religious control and cultural destruction/distortion, all in the service of making the colonial state the sole arbiter of the fate of those whose lands it occupies. The so-called Autonomous regions such as Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, have experienced massive demographic transformation since the formation of the PRC (see Bequelin 2000; Fischer 2008). This is a familiar strategy of colonialists everywhere, for ‘colonialism is that form of intergroup domination in which settlers in significant number migrate permanently to the colony from the colonizing power’ (Horvath 1972: 50). Demographic change, from the state’s view, is meant to reduce insecurity stemming from hostile native populations.



As Cliff highlights through his work, “the partnership of stability” between Han residents of Xinjiang and the government is based on the confidence that Uyghur separatism will no longer work due to the significant Han population; sinification there is an essential part of ‘the process of integration’ (Cliff 2012: 82-83).

Development is a sacred doctrine for all post-colonial states and China is no exception. What makes the form of development taking place in Chinese-controlled Xinjiang and Tibet more than internal colonialism is the fact that many Uyghurs and Tibetans perceive it as alien as well as alienating, if not outright threatening. The basic premise behind development in contemporary China is not the empowerment of these peoples but their disempowerment by making them dependent on the state, by destroying their traditional ways of being, and by taking away their dignity, ultimately achieved through state violence. Development in the colonial context is not geared toward helping the elite rule the majority but rather toward helping the alien state further consolidate its control over the people and its occupation of the territory.

### **Conclusion: Challenging Colonialist Chinese Nation-Statism**

While outside China, amongst activists, politicians and academics, there is a distinct recognition of Xinjiang and Tibet as sites of conflict and violence, apologists for Chinese colonisation argue that there is no ‘Xinjiang problem’ nor any ‘Tibet question’. Thus, the Chinese government insists that the ‘so-called “Tibet issue” is by no means an ethnic, religious and human rights issue; rather, it is the Western anti-China forces’ attempt to restrain, split, and demonize China’ (Information Office 2009: 44-45). Similarly, they blame the World Uyghur Congress or the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) for all the problems in Xinjiang. Yet Chinese state paranoia around

internal dissent from the colonizing discourse and practice is high, and reflects a deep insecurity within the Chinese nation-state project (Topgyal 2016). As Callahan argues, ‘fragmentation constitutes one of the few political crimes left in China; the worst epithet is not capitalist or counterrevolutionary, but splittist’ (Callahan 2004: 209). This fear of separatism is deployed by the state to justify securitisation of life and militarisation of place in Xinjiang and Tibet. Alleged (and in recent years sometimes real) acts of extremism, separatism and terrorism from Uyghurs and Tibetans are evoked as existential threats to the stability of the rising China.

While it is understandable for the colonisers to seek to legitimize their territorial, political, social and religious control by using the tropes of paternalism and progress, as scholars of China and its occupied peoples, it is important for us to not be complicit. Rather than see colonialism as a thing of the European past, we should identify its present-day avatars and critique it. The ‘articulation of the concept of colonality of power offers the prospect of developing a global paradigm of the colonial relationship that will provide a deeper theoretical understanding of the powerful resistance that continues to emerge in subaltern communities and nations around the world’ (Allen 2005: 10). As Uyghurs and Tibetans continue to resist as well as accommodate to the colonial system, as scholars we have our own positionalities to consider.

The question for scholars studying minoritised ethno-national peoples in general, and Uyghurs and Tibetans in particular, is our complicity, or not, with the Chinese nation-state’s political project of depoliticising ethno-national identities in order to serve the colonial purpose of paternalistic and militarised control. If we question the claims of ethno-national peoples to their separate identities on the grounds that these are imaginary or imagined (for example Sautman 2006a, 2000), do we also ask the same questions of the Chinese nationalist project? If we argue that Uyghur or

Tibetan nationalism is imagined but then take for granted Chinese sovereign claims over Tibet or Xinjiang that legitimize the use of dehumanisation, securitisation, militarisation and violence over individual and collective Uyghurs and Tibetans, we are not neutral but siding with the powerful. The framework of colonialism thus remains useful and even vital to understand and critique present-day practices:

The historical interpretations of colonialism help us understand not only the past but the present and future of ethnic groups within and between national states. In a world where force continues to assure the dominance of some nations, classes, and sexes over others, recognizing the systemic causes of inequality from the individual, through the regional, between the national, to the global helps us to solve the problems and provides a map to a more egalitarian and peaceful world (Chavez 2011: 809).

For a genuinely postcolonial way of being, we need to constantly challenge colonialist endeavours wherever they may be, because at the heart of these lie dehumanizing beliefs of inequality. The Chinese militarised occupation of the homelands of the Uyghurs and Tibetans is a conspicuous example of ongoing contemporary colonization by a modern nation-state. As this paper has sought to argue, the securitisation of everyday life in Xinjiang and Tibet is a product of, and a tool to reinforce, that colonisation.

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