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Contemporary Chinese colonial paternalism and the hypocrisy of US far-left denialism

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ABSTRACT

While the Chinese Communist Party has long implemented a colonial-paternalist mode of governance over Tibetans and Uyghurs, there is a curious phenomenon of a notable segment of the far left in the United States (US) defending it under the guise of anti-imperialism. This phenomenon needs unpacking. The article identifies how contemporary China is a colonizing state using paternalist vocabulary and highlights a few prominent US far leftists who deny or advocate Chinese colonialism. This hypocrisy is not a result of speaking truth to power but siding with a colonizing, paternalist, and authoritarian state against those suffering under it; it is pro-colonial while claiming to be anti-colonial.

KEYWORDS China; Tibet; Uyghurs; colonialism; paternalism

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Introduction

Human rights organizations and scholars regularly highlight authoritarianism and rights abuses in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Freedom House Index considers Tibet the world's least free territory/country, and mainland China consistently "unfree" (Freedom House 2023). In most progressive circles, China's characterization as an authoritarian party-state is taken as a given. However, there is a conspicuous strand of leftist thinking in the West that sees all criticism of China as stemming from jealousy of the "imperialist West" and defends China's party-state as anti-colonial and anti-imperialist. These are far-left denialists, often mocked by critics as "tankies," who present themselves as providing an alternative to not only the right but also the left-liberal positions within Western societies.

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In the contemporary West, anti-colonialism is often associated with the left. The primary focus includes critiquing states, institutions, corporations, and academia in the West for various things: not letting decolonization be anything more than the formal independence of countries in Asia and Africa; perpetrating neocolonialism and dependency; undertaking military and humanitarian interventions in the Global South that undermine the sovereignty of the formerly colonized people; seeking to maintain Western dominance in a world where sovereign statehood is the *de jure* norm; not adequately recognizing continuing settler-colonial projects in various parts of the world; and not scrutinizing cultural imperialism and the perpetuation of imperialist knowledge production.¹

However, a prominent strand within the left in the United States (US) holds a hypocritical, not principled, anti-colonial position. Far-left denialists treat with suspicion and contempt any leftist thinking that is critical of China's party-state. This article is specifically about US far-left denialism and its attitude toward the colonial-paternalist practices of the party-state in China. The denialists read conspiracy into every criticism of China, arguing that the mainstream media, as well as the mainstream progressive left, are all complicit with US imperial designs against China.

Academic and legal scholarship has long discussed imperialism and colonialism, with varying views on their interchangeability and emotional impact (see Arneil 2023; Horvath 1972; Said 1994; Strausz-Hupé and Hazard 1958; Twitchett 1965). I agree with Peter Perdue (2009, 89) that "[w]e need not distinguish 'colonial' from 'imperial' too sharply. The two terms generally describe related aspects of the same phenomenon." Both imperialism and colonialism involve asymmetric relations, political-paternalist-cultural dominance of one collective over the other, and exclusivist proprietary claims. I argue later that the Chinese state's paternalism today has elements of both imperial and colonial behaviors.

Scholars and activists often use the terms "anti-imperial" and "anti-colonial" interchangeably. An ideal anti-imperial/anti-colonial position would oppose unjust imperial and colonial endeavors everywhere and would not be shaped by *who* the colonizer is. However, US far-left denialists are driven by the "who" question; they are solely animated by anti-Western colonialism and anti-Western imperialism rather than by anti-colonialism/anti-imperialism *per se*.

Despite well-documented repressive actions in Tibet and Xinjiang (see HRW, *n.d.*; Maizland 2022), US far-left denialists claim that China is a victim of "information warfare" and deserves solidarity from anti-imperialists. They reject the agency of not only Uyghurs and Tibetans, but also Hong Kongers, Taiwanese, and Chinese dissidents who have been highlighting and challenging the authoritarian, colonialist, and paternalist party-state in China. There is a general silence in academia about this phenomenon (Anand 2019; Yam 2022), even though this has a detrimental impact on

public discourse connected to some of the most oppressed communities in the world facing paternalist authoritarianism and colonial occupation.

With a focus primarily on Uyghurs and Tibetans, this article establishes the repressive nature of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) state making as colonial, with paternalism as integral to it. It then sets out some prominent examples of US far-left denialism that equate anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism with only anti-US imperialism and thus practice a form of masculinist hypocrisy where "only we" in the West can be strong enough to be imperial. It is masculinist because it denies the "other" any agency and makes the story about the "self." It is hypocrisy because it is selective in adopting, challenging, and distorting narratives about China's coloniality vis-à-vis Tibetans and Uyghurs.

China's colonial practices

A colonizing party-state: change and continuity

The ruling CCP promotes the narrative of China as a victim of a "century of humiliation" by imperialists (Callahan 2004) until the formation of the PRC in 1949. How did the PRC, declared on October 1, 1949, incorporate and govern territories that were the homeland of people who were not Han but had been seen as part of the former Manchu-led Qing Empire – particularly Mongols, Uyghurs, and Tibetans? The CCP's earlier ideology – unlike the narrower Han-dominated conception of the Chinese nation of the Kuomintang (KMT) – "in a sense had a supra-ethnic appeal, similar to the Manchu imperial authority's for Inner Asian people" (Liu 2006, 85). The new party-state faced various challenges in different areas. As Mao Zedong (1956) acknowledged, "[w]e say China is a country vast in territory, rich in resources, and large in population; as a matter of fact, it is the Han nationality whose population is large and the minority nationalities whose territory is vast and whose resources are rich."²

The idea of a homeland of Manchus had been diluted during the Qing empire itself. Under pressure from the Soviet Union, the Republic of China had already given up its claim on Outer Mongolia in the 1940s, and the PRC continued with the practice of recognizing Mongolian independence. However, other parts of "Inner Asia" – Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet – were brought under direct control using military occupation by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the presentation of that occupation as "liberation," the signing of treaties with a promise of accommodation with local elites (Tsakhirmaa 2022), the dispatching of Han "pioneers"³ to effect demographic transformation, the creation and consolidation of the Chinese nation through ethnic classification (Joniak-Lüthi 2015), and the gradual establishment of the regional ethnic autonomy system (Potter 2010). The promise of accommodation did not last long, and from the late 1950s until the late

1970s, there were relentless attacks on and dismantling of every facet of ethnonational life that made Uyghurs and Tibetans distinct. After a popular uprising, the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959 and created a government-in-exile in India as the traditional Tibetan state was erased in its original land (see Goldstein 2019; Shakya 1999). While the Cultural Revolution was repressive throughout the PRC, its impact on Uyghurs and Tibetans (Woesser 2020) was especially severe.

Xinjiang's population shifted from being predominantly Uyghur to nearly equal between Uyghurs and Han, a trend that has accelerated in recent years (see various sources in the Xinjiang Documentation Project, [n.d.](#)). Tibet also witnessed a significant migration of Han and Hui people, especially into urban areas (see Dorjee 2017; Fischer 2021). Various researchers and commentators have highlighted the reality of demographic transformation and domestication through control over language and land use (White 2021).

There were various forms of cultural revival in Tibetan and Uyghur lands in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by a significant crackdown in the subsequent two decades, especially after the mass protests in 2008 followed by the self-immolation protests in Tibetan regions and the protests in Urumqi in Xinjiang in 2009. Various rights organizations and diaspora groups have documented that the scale of repression over the last decade has been widespread and intense.

The party-state's colonial practices in Tibet and Xinjiang have not been very different from the behavior of European imperial and colonial powers, which included paternalism, extermination, assimilation, and relative equilibrium (Anand 2019; Horvath 1972, 47), as well as "inconsistency between the promise of liberty and the reality of colonial illiberalism" (Gathii 2007, 1014). The regional ethnic autonomy system persists despite serious challenges from within the party-state in recent years (see Elliott 2015). This is because it has served as a primary official vehicle for nation building by a Han-dominated CCP over a territory that includes significant portions of land considered homeland by non-Han ethnonational people. When we pay close attention to the promises of early CCP leaders, autonomy had a different meaning from how it is usually understood. It was a tool of management and colonial dominance akin to how European powers in the nineteenth century used a mix of recognition, collaboration, paternalism, domestication, repression, and extermination of traditional institutions and practices. As Michael C. Davis (2012, 441) points out, for the CCP, even ideologically, "autonomy was merely a temporary solution on the path to ultimate assimilation."

Over time, the party-state's approach toward Uyghurs and Tibetans shifted from claiming to promote liberation, then national regional autonomy, followed by a cultural revolution, cultural revival, development, and ultimately security (on Xinjiang, see Clarke 2022; Finley 2022; Tobin 2022). After Mao's concerns about Han chauvinism and minority nationalism both being

threats to the revolutionary ideas of the CCP in the 1950s (Mao 1956), and various political developments in China under Xi Jinping, we are now dealing with renewed muscular nationalism (Zhao 2016, 2021), which is a significantly Han-oriented Chinese nationalism (Carrico 2017; Leibold 2024; Wardega 2024, 250–251). Despite the shifts over the decades, what has remained consistent is a colonial-paternalist governance where the party-state insists that it knows best and is the only source of political legitimacy, with minority ethnic nationalities having no right to question the party-state.

Turning ethnonational people into subjects: Uyghurs and Tibetans “liberated”

In recent years, scholars and activists have argued that contemporary China is not anti-imperial but a colonizing power, especially in Xinjiang and Tibet (see Anand 2012, 2019; Byler 2022; Gladney 1998; Tobin 2022; Xinjiang Documentation Project, n.d.). “Claiming the People’s Republic of China to be an imperial polity rather than (only) a multi-ethnic one is to assert an anti-imperial politics and to centre a colonized perspective” (McGranahan 2019, 519). 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). This is what China does from the perspectives of Tibetans (Lokyitsang 2012) and Uyghurs. As Ronald Horvath (1972, 45) argues, “Tibet in relation to China is a conquered colony with a repressive military government; and ever since pre-Han times, China has expanded by a cultural process no more nor less noble than colonialism and imperialism.”

Here, I outline some of the main features associated with colonization and explain how Chinese state behavior aligns with all of them, before proceeding to consider US far-left denialism in the next section. There are some differences between the situations in Xinjiang and Tibet (Chung 2018). However, here the focus is on the similarities because it allows us to identify the broad contours of the CCP’s colonial-paternalist state making over Uyghurs and Tibetans.

Colonization and colonialism involve territorial occupation, political control, economic dominance, societal transformation, cultural domestication, politicized knowledge production, violence, militarization, and paternalism. All of these are evident in how China rules Tibet and Xinjiang.

Uyghurs (see Millward 2021) and Tibetans have their own sense of homeland; it is contested, fluid, and, in academic terms, “imagined community,” but no more imagined than any nation that has a state, including China. Around the time of the declaration of the PRC by Mao in 1949, Xinjiang was incorporated into the PRC through a mix of political and military means, and the PLA fully controlled the land of Uyghurs by early 1950.

Tibet was the last polity in Inner Asia to be occupied and come under the PRC's control (Shakya 1999). While Beijing forced a treaty on May 23, 1951 (the "Seventeen Point Agreement") on the traditional Tibetan state, securing the latter's incorporation into the new PRC, most Chinese government accounts refer to the entry of the PLA in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, in October 1951 as completing the "peaceful liberation" (Goldstein 1997). In neither of these cases is there any evidence of prior popular demand for, or subsequent popular acceptance of, the assertion of territorial control by the CCP. In fact, Beijing has made it clear that its relation is one of proprietorship; for instance, the official White Paper of 1992 refers to China's "ownership of Tibet" (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China 1992).

Territorial control achieved through military means and treaties was followed by political incorporation, where the will of the people being governed was never allowed to play a role. The two most important features of the relation between Beijing and the polities that it created in the territories that it occupied are asymmetry of power and denial of agency to the people. The political system in China is authoritarian (Hildebrandt 2013) and highly repressive, especially in what Beijing sees as the lands of minority nationalities, such as Tibetans and Uyghurs. The power in the Chinese political system lies with the CCP and not the government. It is a party-state. In CCP political propaganda, Tibetan and Uyghur leaders are only ever represented as expressing gratitude to the Central Government for liberating, developing, and helping their people.

The success in Inner Mongolia in pacifying the population, compared to Tibet and Xinjiang, has prompted the speeding up of demographic and other forms of colonization by the party-state in recent years (Han and Paik 2014). In the case of Uyghurs, the objective of the party-state has transitioned to a "fundamentally *settler colonial* one: the dissolution of autonomous Uyghur identity and its replacement by one subordinate to the Chinese state" (Clarke 2022, 3; see also ARTE 2023). As Patrick Wolfe (2006, 402) argues, "assimilation can be a more effective mode of elimination than conventional forms of killing."

No colonization can take place without violence and militarization. Occupation need not always lead to colonization; however, in the long term it does often result in exploitation or the arrival of settlers, or a mix of both (Annus 2012). Re-education campaigns, surveillance, incarcerations, and the denial of human rights are neither peripheral nor exceptional but integral to Chinese rule over Uyghurs as well as Tibetans. There is extensive documentation of violence deployed by China in Xinjiang and Tibet by multiple human rights organizations.

Full-fledged colonization goes beyond territorial and political control and the use of violence. It involves a complete subjugation of people and their

economy to serve the interests decided by the metropole. Development in a colonial context is not an absence of growth, but rather a rewiring of economic linkages that makes the colonized dependent; development is a mechanism of control and not a means of empowerment. In contemporary times, “development is a key tool used by colonising nation-states to domesticate a restive ethnonational people by erasing any vestiges of economic self-sufficiency or economic links with other countries, and making them dependent on the controlling state” (Anand and Kaul 2025, 19). Various researchers and organizations have highlighted the mechanisms through which China domesticates the region’s economy and presents it as a modernization and development effort for which local people should be grateful (see Roche, Leibold, and Hillman 2023; Yeh 2014; for an alternative view, see Sautman 2006). In his detailed analysis more than two decades ago, David Bachman (2004, 157) argued that the economic growth in Xinjiang had primarily benefited Han residents and pointed out that “economic colonialism (or internal colonialism) in Xinjiang can be understood only as a response to Han-perceived security threats, both internal and external to Xinjiang.”

Societal and cultural transformation are integral to colonial rule. If we look at the various ways in which the CCP has achieved this with Uyghurs and Tibetans, it is no less systemic and pernicious than what the British did in India (see for example Wilson 2016) or the French in Algeria (see for example Barclay, Chopin, and Evans 2017). The categorization of society, its regulation through divide and rule, surveillance, and monitoring, the domestication of cultural differences, and the use of these differences to justify paternalism and violence are all common. Today, as scholars and rights organizations have pointed out, there are no aspects of the social and cultural lives of Tibetans and Uyghurs that are autonomous from the Chinese state (see for example Freedom House 2023; Maizland 2022). The internment camps that have been running in recent years in Xinjiang are presented as “work camp[s]” or “patriotic re-education camp[s]” (Amnesty International 2021). In the case of Tibet, the extreme examples of cultural control include colonial boarding schools (Leibold and Dorjee 2024) and the party state’s attempt to regulate the reincarnation of Tibetan *trulkus* (Anand 2023; McConnell 2013).⁴ This will to dominate and domesticate is also reflected in the renaming of places and the control over knowledge production. Beijing insists that Tibet, which was until recently called “China’s Tibet” in official English-language reports and publications, should now be referred to solely as “Xizang” (“Western treasure house”) (see Jones 2025; Šebok 2024). As Tsering Shakya (2024) points out,

China’s demand that the international community adopt “Xizang” mirrors colonial practices of renaming territories to assert dominance ... China’s renaming effort aims to subsume Tibetan identity within a Han-centric narrative,

erasing the region's distinct cultural and historical significance and marginalizing Tibetan voices, their heritage, and their sovereignty.

The paternalism of the party-state

As Edward Said (1994) reminds us, there is no empire without knowledge production; the will to know is closely connected to the will to control. In the case of China, universities, the media, social media, and public spaces are all under CCP control, with very little room to express dissenting views, especially when it comes to Tibet and Xinjiang. John Powers (2018, 9) argues that PRC orientalists produce knowledge in the service of empire where claims of Chinese imperialism are refuted to create a

satisfying national grand narrative, one in which superior Han civilization was peacefully disseminated to the grateful minorities, who themselves yearned to cast away their cultures, religions, languages, traditions, and histories and move forward by embracing the advanced civilization of the Han. The only thing of any value they had to offer in exchange was their land, and they willingly did so.

While much international attention is focused on the gross violation of human rights and spectacular examples of denial of freedom and on visible practices of dehumanization that Uyghurs and Tibetans experience, what makes the situation colonial and repressive rather than simply repressive is the crucial role played by paternalism. In fact, the Chinese party-state presents itself as a paternalist state and the Han majority as an elder brother who seeks to educate (on forcible education, see OHCHR 2023), help, and civilize “backward” minority nationalities (on the Chinese state’s “civilizing project,” see Harrell 1995).

The use of paternalism by the Chinese state infantilizes, exoticizes, and eroticizes Tibetans and Uyghurs (on the gendered imagination of minorities, both feminized and masculinized, see Gladney 1994, 2004; Hillman and Henfry 2006; Schein 1997). To an extent, paternalism is a feature of the party-state’s relationship with all of its citizens. However, it is more acute, securitized, and pernicious with respect to the ethnonational people whose land it occupies and claims as part of the motherland. Revolutionary governance, including the deployment of violence, is legitimized through reference to paternalist care for the population in the name of popular will (see Strauss 2002). “To sustain its authoritarian legitimacy, the Chinese state acts in concert with the patriarchal family; both institutions are grounded in paternalistic cultural norms” (Wang 2020, 2). The authority figure of the state, like the father within the family, is meant to evoke respect, invite sacrifice, and erase dissent (on the gendered “father state” and the violence of “liberation” in Tibet, see Makley 2007).

In my reading, the paternalism of the contemporary Chinese state that has become integral to its coloniality vis-à-vis Tibetans and Uyghurs stems from

three different sources. The first is the patriarchal nature of modern state making in general (Brown 1992; Randall and Waylen 1998). States are obsessed with dominance and control, keen to claim proprietorial ownership and focus on masculinist strength. With the establishment of a party-state through the deployment of coercion and cooperation, and the expansion and consolidation, the CCP's emphasis has been on controlling the masses in the name of the masses. Tibetans and Uyghurs have to be possessed, domesticated, and controlled as part of China.

The second source is the modernist underpinning of communism as an ideology. The communist notion that many people suffer from false consciousness and only a vanguard party can mobilize and lead, in straightforward terms, points to a hierarchy of revolutionary consciousness where the CCP knows best and others must follow, whether they believe it or not; if they do not, they need re-education, if necessary in a labor camp or worse. Even in terms of gender relations, communist systems have had a contested relationship with feminism (see De Haan 2016) and often been anti-feminist (see Miroiu 2007). For example, while espousing "equality between men and women" (Zheng 2016, 3), China's authoritarian state has also set a strong trend of anti-feminism. Feminism, other than state feminism, is rejected as a form of bourgeois individualism (Evans 2007); senior leadership has been almost exclusively male.

The third source is the resuscitated patriarchal Confucian ideology. After presenting itself as against tradition, including through an attack on Confucian temples during the Cultural Revolution, the CCP has in recent decades selectively invoked Confucian ideas and ideals. Since the 1990s, there has been "a concerted CCP campaign to encourage quasi-Confucian scholarship along lines congenial to Party-State authority" (Ford 2015, 1033; see also Brady 2008).

Xiao (filial piety) is a Confucian value and can be interpreted to legitimize patriarchal control in the name of duty (see Ikels 2004). "Paternalistic leadership is a style that combines strong authority with fatherly benevolence" (Zheng, Shi, and Liu 2020, 1; for a different view that contrasts paternalist and democratic modes of governance and points toward denial of autonomy, see Andreas 2019). The CCP's governmental paternalism involves "filial piety in China that emphasises respect, obedience and support from citizens to the government and its paternalistic acts" (Ye and Thomas 2020, 316).

The defenders of Confucianism present it as an alternative to liberal democracy that is kinder and more culturally "suited" to China (Bell 2010). For instance, Sarah Flavel and Brad Hall (2020, 250) propose that Confucianism leads to "exemplary paternalism": "Confucian exemplary paternalism is not authoritarian." Thus, *xiao* is seen as an alternative to hierarchical top-down coercive relations with a focus on care and duty. However, as feminist scholarship and activism have long argued, care can often be control.

Moreover, while in “Confucian theory of paternalistic gratitude, the people will be grateful to a benevolent ruler without this feeling being demanded by the state” (Lee 2021, 635), this is not the case with the CCP’s political use of Confucianism for its non-Confucian goals, where gratitude is demanded and even policed. Thus, through a purportedly egalitarian effort to replace loyalty to family with loyalty to the state during the Cultural Revolution, “post-Mao leaders have emphasised sentimental bonds of filial devotion that could apply simultaneously to the family, the Chinese state, and the Chinese nation” (Fong 2004, 634). The primary purpose for the party-state is to consolidate authoritarianism; Yi-Huah Jiang (2018, 156–157) says that the CCP “attempts to promote Confucianism in order to consolidate its authoritarian rule.”

Nitasha Kaul (2021, 118) argues that coloniality is at its core patriarchal since it takes away the agency of the oppressed while instilling authority in the state and those who dominate it:

The patriarch is represented as the one with privileges that stem from their “duty of care” as the “head of the household”; they have the authority to shape, decide or dictate the lives of others because they supposedly know what is best. In fact, the patriarch is often projected as sacrificing their own energies to take care of the “family” through a mix of love and the iron fist.

In a similar vein, we can see that the father figure of the Chinese state, the CCP, and most recently its paramount leader, Xi (see Fincher 2018), assume both the right and the responsibility to exercise domination in the name of care. While scholars have focused on the politics of resurgent nationalism and cultural revivalism in the ongoing Xi era (Lin 2024; Rosenberger 2020), insufficient attention has been paid to the resurgence and violence of paternalism (Byler 2018). In fact, in recent years, there has been added emphasis on presenting Xi as a kind of “paternalistic leader” (Dai 2018). Clyde Yicheng Wang and Zifeng Chen (2023, 751) argue that there has been an emergence of “daddy state” discourse under Xi, which “conjures strong paternalistic power from China’s economic capacity.” Whether sexism is “benevolent” or “malevolent,” it is sexism (see Viki, Abrams, and Hutchinson 2003); whether paternalism is caring or controlling or both, it is patriarchal and it must be called out as such.

The Chinese state is paternalist for all of its citizens and, in addition, colonizing for those such as Uyghurs and Tibetans who see themselves as occupied by China. Darren Byler (2018) points out with regard to the Uyghurs that “the tough love of violent paternalism is simply a process through which to assert the authority of the Chinese state with Xi Dada or ‘Big Daddy Xi’ as a father figure.” In the context of Uyghur Muslim women, Rodriguez-Merino and Zhang (2023, 920) identify the “self-image of the Chinese state as a masculinized savior-like entity offering a pathway to an emancipatory modernity project.”

Given the conspicuous colonial paternalism of the CCP and the extensive documentation of its repression, how does a prominent strand of the US far left, claiming to be anti-colonial and anti-imperialist, indulge in denialism?

US far-left denialism and China

The mantra of far-left denialists in the West in general, and the US in particular, is that it is only the US/West that is oppressive, imperial, and colonial, while states seen as inimical by the US/West – such as China, Russia, and Iran – are all victims or heroic resisters seeking to create a multipolar world. As Elia Ayoub (2020) highlights, “[a]ctivists who are otherwise progressive and even revolutionary can therefore end up, at best, reproducing the narratives propagated by authoritarian governments in peripheral countries; at worst, they could be actively supporting brutal repression.” “Pitting the virtually irredeemable US against the innocent and besieged China has become something of a narrative mainstay among segments of the anti-imperialist left in North America” (Ross and Dobson 2022).

To illustrate this, the focus in this section is on some common themes shared by a few far-left public figures and organizations. What Lev Nachman, Adrian Rauchfleisch, and Brian Hioe (2022, 53) say about the Qiao Collective, a US-based radical left Chinese diaspora collective, holds for the entire swathe of far-left denialists; they reject all criticisms of China as “inherently orientalist” and argue that “[t]he US left should critique the US and stand with China” and insist that “China is benevolent/socialist.” As Fabio Lanza (2021, 22) details, the Qiao Collective

– “a volunteer-run group of diaspora Chinese writers, artists, and researchers working to challenge escalating Western imperialism on China” – has in the past two years evolved from a Twitter account to a full-blown online publication and has become a loud pro-China voice in the United States and in global political discourse.

The denialist narratives go along the following lines: the US is the dominant imperial power and is jealous of China’s rise; what the US wants is a new Cold War; and all progressives and leftists should reject it and come together as anti-imperialists to defend China.

Codepink, a feminist leftist collective, runs an online campaign “China Is Not Our Enemy” (Codepink, n.d.). In addition to increasing its military expenditure, pivoting to Asia, and building alliances to counter China’s rise, the US is accused of waging information warfare to malign China. Vijay Prashad, a prominent Indian leftist intellectual based in the US, and Jie Xiong, a Chinese intellectual based in China, write:

The United States has been struggling to keep up with China’s rapid scientific and technological advancements and has few intellectual or industrial tools in

place to compete. This is the reason it has tried to stall China's advances using diplomatic and political power, and through information warfare; these elements comprise what is called a "hybrid war." (Prashad and Xiong 2021a)

China is seen as a victim of Sinophobia, Western jealousy, and racism. The Qiao Collective (2020) argues:

It's orientalism, racism, and chauvinism to project onto China the US framework of race and empire onto China [*sic*].

China is a real place with millenia [*sic*] of indigenous cultural, political, and ethnic dynamics. You're not an expert on China just because you understand the US.

These arguments and several articles by the Qiao Collective use progressive ideas of anti-racism to defend China's authoritarian party-state. The Qiao Collective's statement equates the CCP with Chinese civilization and people; it takes the undemocratic CCP's claim to represent all of the 1.4 billion people in China at face value. A good illustration of this is "Reflections on the Communist Party of China's Centenary" (Qiao Collective 2021a).

How do these far-left figures in the US respond to international human rights organizations and exiled Uyghur, Tibetan, and Chinese human rights activists who have been setting out extensive public evidence highlighting Chinese state repression? Denialists either ignore or attack their credibility by accusing them of being part of nefarious US information warfare. Dissidents and exiles from China and its occupied territories are conspiratorially portrayed as proxies for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the US state. In this dismissal, US far-left denialists and the CCP are on the same page, using the same vocabulary.⁵

Given the recent media and scholarly attention on internment camps and allegations of genocide in Xinjiang (Byler 2022; Roberts 2020), these far-left figures are putting renewed effort into denial. All reports are rejected as "atrocious propaganda as it has been wielded to justify US imperial adventurism" (Qiao Collective 2021b). They dismiss allegations not only of genocide but also of any repression. Margaret Kimberley, who runs the radical *Black Agenda Report* and holds strong far-left denialist views, tweeted in 2020: "These are lies. There is no evidence of Uighur 'concentration camps.' More hybrid war against China" (Kimberley 2020). When challenged on her tweet by scholars of Xinjiang, she dismissed them with contemptuous self-assurance.

Thus, using vocabulary that is somewhat similar to that of the alt-right, which is obsessed with "fake news" propagated by "legacy media," far-left denialists reject allegations and evidence marshaled by human rights organizations as well as Uyghur and Tibetan exiles. They do not comment on the

enforced silencing of Uyghurs and Tibetans within the PRC. Documented evidence of oppression against Uyghurs is rejected (Sachs and Schabas 2021) as stemming from “unhinged far-right conspiracy theory” (Martinez 2022). Prashad and Xiong (2021a) write: “The US government’s information warfare against China has produced the ‘fact’ that there is genocide in Xinjiang. Once this has been established, it helps develop diplomatic and economic warfare.” Clearly, for Prashad and Xiong, there is no “fact” of genocide in Xinjiang. In the process of challenging allegations of genocide, they deny *any* wrongdoing by the party-state and, in fact, often praise it for bringing progress and development.

Various forms of resistance by Tibetans since the 1950s – mass protests, armed uprisings, peaceful acts of resistance, and self-immolations – inside Tibet or in exile are ignored as far-left denialists promote the idea that the party-state in China is a harbinger of progress. As Charlie Hore (2008) points out,

[t]he substance of left opposition to the Tibetan protests, the Tibetan independence movement and the idea of Tibetan independence (which are three quite different things) comes down to three main strands: China has a right to be in Tibet; the Dalai Lama is a reactionary who would restore feudalism; and the Tibetan movement is a pawn of US imperialism.

When accused of whitewashing Chinese repression in Xinjiang, Prashad (2022b) claimed “I have *never* written about any of these matters, and have *never* said that they happened or did not happen” (emphases added), but then went on to say that

[t]he Uyghur situation, like so much else, is exaggerated in the Western press. I spoke with many intellectuals who are otherwise critical of the Chinese state in many ways – including two Uyghur scholars – and they say that there is more to this story than meets the eye. I don’t want to speculate because I have not been to Ürümqi.

This would be more credible had Prashad not co-written the following in 2021: “Accusations by the United States government and its allies about genocide and forced labor in Xinjiang have brought China’s westernmost province into the gaze of the international media” (Prashad and Xiong 2021b). He did not hesitate to cast doubt on the suffering of Uyghurs and praise China in 2021 while claiming later in 2022 to have “never written about any of these matters.” In fact, Prashad continues to indulge in pro-China apology. For instance, praising Chinese leader Xi, he opines:

So what you see actually is a combination of various things. Poverty alleviation. Re-education of people who have been seduced into some of these terroristic kind of Islamic groups. It’s a combination of all these things happening in Xinjiang now. (quoted in Podur 2022)

Far-left denialists reiterate the line of the CCP that the benign state is providing “far-reaching de-radicalization and economic development programs” (Qiao Collective 2021b). Rejecting the “shameful lies peddled by American Empire,” another far-left activist, Danny Haiphong (2020a), wrote in the *Black Agenda Report* that “China is a peace-loving nation that is developing the material basis for a post-imperialist global order.”

A prominent forum for the US far left is the *Grayzone*, with Max Blumenthal as editor-in-chief, promoting itself as “[i]ndependent news & investigative journalism on empire” (*Grayzone*, n.d.). It denies any evidence of oppression in Tibet and Xinjiang. One of its articles calls reports of Uyghur repression and genocide “false” and a “regime propaganda tool” (Singh 2021). Far-left denialists portray themselves as warriors defending China: “We must resolutely oppose and expose anti-China slander, which aims to break the bonds of solidarity within the global working class and all those opposed to imperialism” (Martinez 2022).

What Blumenthal, Codepink, Prashad, the Qiao Collective, and others do is not ask for nuance but completely deny the agency of Uyghur and Tibetan exiles and become apologists for Chinese colonialism. Haiphong (2020b) mocked progressive Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) for paying respect to the Dalai Lama:

AOC wishes feudal lords in Tibet a Merry Xmas and gives a big lump of coal to China and the vast majority of people in Tibet who never think twice about whether life is preferable now or pre-1959 when monasteries were used as CIA weapons depots and slavery was legal.

Along similar lines, Blumenthal (2020) tweeted on December 25, 2020: “Not the first time AOC has paid homage to the longtime CIA asset known as the Dalai Lama.” In the same Twitter thread, he wrote: “Because the CIA aims to destabilize, balkanize and encircle China, it supports the Tibetan, Uyghur and Hong Kong separatist movements, as well as the right-wing government in Taiwan.” Blumenthal and other far-left figures denounce all rights-based and freedom movements that challenge China’s party-state.

Prashad argues that

[i]n Tibet, for instance, when the Lamas were in charge, the wretched feudal conditions for the serfs must be recognized and put on the table. Whatever you feel about the role of the Dalai Lama in the world, the wretched way in which the Lamas ran Tibet has to be put on the table now. (quoted in Podur 2022)

Prashad does not refer to any Tibetan scholar or activist, nor does he engage with any academic literature that highlights the nature of China’s rule in Tibet. A critical analysis of the historic and traditional Tibetan state that existed until 1951 is a legitimate focus for Prashad, but a critical analysis of Tibet under the PRC’s control since 1951 is not.

Occasionally, a few on the far left refer to Michael Parenti's essay on Tibetan history even though Parenti neither claims to be a scholar of Tibet nor is considered one in the arena of Tibetan studies. In the first version of his essay, Parenti (2003) wrote various things critical of Tibetan narratives but did include this reflection:

To be sure, *there is much about the Chinese intervention that is to be deplored ...* Chinese cadres in Tibet too often adopted a supremacist attitude toward the indigenous population. Some viewed their Tibetan neighbors as backward and lazy, in need of economic development and "patriotic education." During the 1990s Tibetan government employees suspected of harboring nationalist sympathies were purged from office, and campaigns were launched to discredit the Dalai Lama. Individual Tibetans reportedly were subjected to arrest, imprisonment, and forced labor for attempting to flee the country, and for carrying out separatist activities and engaging in political subversion ... Meanwhile, Tibetan history, culture, and religion are slighted in schools. Teaching materials, though translated into Tibetan, focus on Chinese history and culture. (emphasis added)

These sentences, which minimally acknowledged that not all Chinese policies are to be celebrated, curiously disappeared from the revised version of the essay in 2007 (Parenti 2007), and it is this revised version that is often cited by far-left denialists. In recent years, with China's rise as a geopolitical power and the party-state pushing back against Western criticisms through investment in foreign propagandists (Ryan, Knight, and Impiombato 2023), we can observe a hardening of US far-left denialist positions. While investigative newspaper reports have highlighted that some far-left denialists may be more than ideological fellow travelers of the party-state (Hvistendahl et al. 2023), here I make no such allegation. What interests me are the ideological justifications that go into whitewashing Chinese colonial practices.

Until October 2022, "What about the Uyghur population in China?" was among the frequently asked questions (FAQ) on Codepink's website, and it provided a list of resources, all critiquing the US:

This is complex and painful for the Uyghurs in China and for Muslims across the globe. Our concern is that it is being used as a tool to drive the US's hybrid war on China, instead of a human rights issue that needs to be addressed as such. There is much wrong with how the US reacted and acted on terrorist attacks as with many governments across the globe, China's included. (Codepink 2022)

The FAQ section (including this question) has since been removed from the website (last checked in June 2026), and the only way to access it is through the Wayback Machine. Like Parenti, Codepink appears to have given up on the pretense of not being completely partisan on China in favor of the total erasure of the narratives of Uyghurs and Tibetans and the portrayal of China as a victim.

What is common to all of these far-left positions is the denial of Chinese state oppression and the hardening of that approach. Even asserting something as basic as that the Chinese political system is authoritarian is questioned by the denialists: “[The] madness of our times seeks to reduce China to an Orientalist caricature – an authoritarian state with a genocidal agenda that seeks global domination” (Prashad 2022a). As Chiara Olivieri (2021) highlights, far-left denialists “frivolously and programmatically tie intellectuals and activists struggling in favor of Uyghur dignity with neoliberal ideologies hostile to the socialist bastion China represents.”

There is an active trivialization of the victims of Chinese colonial-paternalist governance and repression. In 2021, Kimberley posted a Chinese state propaganda video showing Uyghurs going about ordinary life, captioned “Concentration camps! Destroyed mosques! Someone forgot to tell these Uyghurs” (Kimberley 2021). The level of toxicity spread online by far-left denialists against all that they see as inimical is rather high (see Balci, Sirivianos, and Blackburn 2023). In the name of being “anti-imperialist,” these denialists have no hesitation in cheering on Chinese colonial practices. As Azeezah Kanji and David Palumbo-Liu (2021) point out, “[b]y reducing the Uighurs to little more than Great Power pawns, with no autonomous politics or liberation aspirations of their own, some ‘anti-imperialists’ reproduce the imperial hegemony they rail against.”

Far-left commentators present themselves as vanguards of genuine socialism and genuine anti-imperialism. They claim to speak truth to power since “[t]he effectiveness of Western propaganda lies in its ability to render unthinkable any critique or alternative – to monopolize the production of knowledge and truth itself” (Qiao Collective 2021b). However, what far-left denialists do is bolster the colonial practices of China and legitimize them as resistance to US imperialism.

This article should not be seen as a general indictment of the Western radical left position on China but as focused on a specific strand of it that shares more in common with the alt-right in being conspiratorial, rejecting the mainstream media and academia as “fake,” and eulogizing authoritarianism over the messiness of liberal democracies. Far-left denialism is not the only radical left position, for there are many others that are anti-imperialist and critique both the US and China (see Brophy 2019). For instance, *Jacobin* often has articles critiquing China’s policies in Tibet and Xinjiang, including one by Hore (2017), who writes on a socialist case for a free Tibet:

We should support their struggle. If socialism doesn’t mean doing whatever the leaders tell us, but rather making ourselves the subjects of our own history, then we must see Chinese rule in Tibet for what it is – colonialist oppression that needs to be fought. We may not be able to do very much about it right now, but we can start by knowing which side we are on.

Similarly, Peter Chan (2022) argues that China is imperialist at home and, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), abroad:

What is referred to here includes both the traditional military colonial policy and the more modern form of neo-colonialism through political and economic dominance. China has both. Internally, especially with the process of capitalist restoration, Beijing pursued brutal Han colonial and racist policies in ethnic minority regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet. Externally, it has exported capital to seize markets through the BRI, putting countries in debt traps in order to exercise economic domination.

Whether what Uyghurs are witnessing is a full-blown genocide, or close to genocide, or severe repression that may become genocidal can be debated – but that is very different from completely rejecting the evidence of heavy and systemic repression in Xinjiang and the suffering of Uyghurs (Batke 2019). As Simon Gilbert (2021) points out, “US co-option of the Uyghur cause should not be an excuse for withholding support from the oppressed.” Similarly, that the traditional Tibetan state was not idyllic is no excuse for accepting the party-state’s claim of liberation at face value (Anand 2019).

Conclusion

In the first part of this article, I made the case that China’s party-state is colonial paternalist. In the second part, I highlighted some of the examples of the politics of denialism practiced by the US far left. What makes US far-left denialism particularly egregious is that its proponents do it in the name of anti-imperialism when they are advocating for the colonial-paternalist state in China. The pro-China position of US far-left denialists is not a strategic move in a geopolitical game between the US and China; it is not driven by anti-imperialism as a matter of principle. It is neither intellectually coherent nor ethically defensible. It is motivated by ideological solidarity with a strong colonizing and repressive paternalist and authoritarian party-state and denial of humanity and agency to those occupied, oppressed, and/or exiled by that regime. It is driven by what Gerald Roche (2021) calls “narcissistic parochialism” – the resolute refusal to decenter the West as the sole practitioner of imperialism and colonialism.

US far-left denialism exhibits masculinist hypocrisy where only the West is seen as having the agency to be colonial, and only the far left is seen as having a purchase on truth against the mainstream left and liberal positions. It is masculinist because it is based on a lack of humility, a self-assuredness, a refusal to listen to those victimized, and an admiration of a strong paternalist state. This self-assuredness about its ideological purity and speaking truth to US power while cheering for China’s communist party-state and its colonial-paternalist governance of Tibetans and Uyghurs exposes far-left denialists’ selective politics of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, and ultimately their masculinist hypocrisy.

Notes

1. These observations come from a reading of various leftist thinkers, publications, and movements.
2. However, such exhortations by Mao and other leaders against Han chauvinism went hand in hand with treating the Han nationality as advanced, as the vanguard in a Marxist sense and as having the duty to carry along the more “backward” minority nationalities (see Hasmath 2023).
3. From the 1950s, “waves of CCP ‘pioneers’ were sent into Xinjiang to ‘reclaim the land’ and initiate Han settlement under the auspices of the paramilitary Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC)” (Finley 2022, 342). On the continuing role of the XPCC as a key tool in the settler colonial project of the party-state, see Cliff (2016) and Murphy, Elima, and Tobin (2022).
4. Trulkus are the recognized reincarnate lamas; often, they are called “living Buddhas” in China, though Tibetans prefer the term trulku. In the last two decades in particular, Beijing has taken various measures to assert state control over this traditional institution of reincarnate lamas (see Anand 2023).
5. Writing about the response of a section of the far left to the 2008 Tibetan protests, Emily Yeh (2009, 1003) argues: “It should be possible to pursue a radical vision of social justice without trading in one side of a binary for the other, and without accepting that ‘my enemy’s friend must be my enemy’ is an adequate guide to ethical understanding.” Yet, US far-left denialists continue to trivialize rights abuses committed by the party-state in China.

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