Territorialising Chinese Inner Asia: The Neo-Developmentalist State and Minority Unrest

Research Note

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Abstract

Despite the Chinese Communist Party's claim to inter-ethnic harmony, the human rights situation of some of the PRC's 55 official minorities is problematic. The article discusses minority unrest in relation to the ongoing transformation of the country's Inner Asian frontier regions. Taking the three autonomous regions of Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia as case studies, it examines the long-running but recently accelerated processes of modernisation and ethno-political conflict. It argues that minority policy is driven by nationalist / neo-developmentalist motives aimed at both the expansion and intensification of Chinese power, and that this process can be termed state-led territorialisation. Programmes such as the Great Western Development and the Belt and Road Initiative are viewed through the lens of neo-developmentalist territorialisation, which is aimed at entrenching the Communist Party's control of China's frontier regions. This perspective provides explanations for conflict that cover several dimensions, from political, economic and cultural causes to ethno-political strife.

Keywords: Neo-developmentalism, minorities, ethnic conflict, territorialisation, China, Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia

1. Introduction

The Chinese historical / action movie "Dragon Blade" (2015), starring Jackie Chan and John Cusack, presents a vision of an ancient (and upcoming?) *pax sinica* along the Silk Road. When greed for power is overcome, different cultures and peoples can live together in peace and harmony; this is the moral

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standpoint of the film, reflecting the official Chinese ideological line. The film emphasises the prospects for peace not only between East and West, but also between the different ethnic groups of the Silk Road borderlands, portrayed as proto-Uighurs, proto-Mongols or proto-Kazakhs as well as Han Chinese.

In reality, the relationship of the Han majority in the People's Republic of China (PRC) with at least some of the ethnic minorities (*minzu*) is fragile and historically tense. Despite official rhetoric of "ethnic harmony", ethnic minorities tend to be economically marginalised, subject to cultural and linguistic assimilation, and in danger of being accused as political dissidents. Major non-Han ethnic groups live in the vast fringe areas of the periphery of the PRC, which have not prospered as much from economic development as the core areas in the coastal east (Zang 2015, Dillon 2018). Since the beginning of the 21st century, the relationship between the Han-dominated Party state and some of the national ethnic minorities has deteriorated further in several instances, as will be shown.

I argue that minority policy in the Inner Asian frontier is driven by nationalist / neo-developmentalist motifs aimed at both the expansion and intensification of Chinese power, and that this process can be termed a "state-led territorialisation". Three short case studies will support my argument, namely from the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR) and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. It will be shown that the ethnicised struggles over modernisation and assimilation that plague ethnic minorities are intimately connected to overarching development policies and programmes.

Territorialisation is a spatial and cultural projection of power, often state power, within and across geographical territories. By ordering, delineating, constructing and policing territory, powerful actors entrench control over these spaces and the (human and non-human) populations inhabiting them. In this sense, territorialisation is a process of boundary-making; an attempt at homogenising the institutions that govern spaces within a certain polity; and the practice of creating and reinforcing sovereignty over a territory and its inhabitants. Vandergeest and Peluso (1995) have introduced the term to political geography, using it as an analytical lens to describe the exploitation of state forests in Thailand. Since then, it has been applied to manifold contexts, such as national parks (Bassett / Gautier 2014), the reconfiguration of property (Bromley 2017), or pastoral areas in African drylands (Korf et al. 2015). Corson (2011) argues that under certain conditions, non-state actors, such as international conservation NGOs, might play a decisive role in initiating territorialisation processes, for example of protected areas. Hence, I speak here of state-led territorialisation to underline which agent – in the cases discussed here – I see as the driving force of territorialisation, namely the (Chinese) state.

Critical thinking about nation states and territoriality has a long tradition in Asian Studies; among the most important authors in this field of research are, without doubt, Benedict Anderson (2006) and James C. Scott (1998, 2009). Departing from materialist, Marxian-influenced thought, these scholars have scrutinised the social forces and historical developments impacting the social construction of states, nationhood and national territory. Along these lines, the paper investigates the diametrically opposed desire of minorities to uphold their distinct lifestyles and the programme of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to expand and engrain its vision of modernity in the peripheral regions of the PRC. The analysis is necessarily informed by history, as the processes described here are rooted in historic developments, and history is also an important resource and justification for both minority identity and the Chinese state.

The three selected cases represent three of the largest second-tier (i.e. province-level) administrative units and are also part and parcel to the Great Western Development (*xibu da kaifa*) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). I do not mean to imply that other regions within China inhabited by minorities, such as Yunnan or Qinghai, are not important. But the three above-mentioned peripheral regions, which are also the three largest "autonomous" administrative units within China (there are also autonomous prefectures and counties), are observed in the current situation to be the most notable for both discontent and rapid development. The three fringe regions are formerly part of frontier China, borderlands that were incorporated into Chinese reign during the Qing dynasty (Liu 2010: 3–9). They are frequently defined as belonging to "Inner Asia", in contrast to the East Asian Chinese heartland (Lattimore 1940, Bulag 2005). As Chinese concepts of territoriality have shifted from an imperial hegemony of "all under heaven", the outer borders of China have solidified and now, since at least 1959, formally encompass the frontier regions. Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet have all been, and still are, destinations of significant in-migration of Han Chinese. Inner Mongolia was the earliest and most massively affected, a process dating back to the Qing, while the large-scale settlement of Han in Tibet and Xinjiang is far more recent. According to the 2010 census, in IMAR, more than 19.5 million of the roughly 24 million inhabitants were Han and only about 4.2 million were ethnic Mongols (Guo 2017: 324–325); in Xinjiang, of the 21.8 million inhabitants, 10 million were Uighurs, 1.4 million Kazakhs and 8.8 million were Han (Guo 2017: 352–352); while of TAR's rather small population of 3 million people, 2.7 million were ethnic Tibetans and about 245,000 were Han (Guo 2017: 350–352).

The three regions are not only destinations for Han out-migration from central and coastal China, but they are also resource frontiers. The accelerated exploitation of natural resources drives much of Han migration, and has

led to a large-scale and ongoing transformation of frontier spaces. Protests connected with these changes, which often bring environmental degradation and pollution, tend to be quelled by the state. Of importance to the overall treatment of China's frontier region is the declared aim to battle the "three evil forces" of terrorism, separatism and religious fanaticism (Liu 2018). This is the central justification for repressive measures against members of minority groups in the three regions.

2. The development state and the Western regions

Modern Chinese statehood cannot be disassociated from its economic conditions. Since the beginning of the Open Door Policy under Deng in the late 1970s, the Communist Party has transformed the country from a rural-based Third World country to the world's second largest, and rapidly growing, economy (Zhang et al. 2016: v). The post-opening People's Republic is characterised by rapid social transformations that have created winners and losers, with an increasingly affluent middle class and masses of working poor, bound together by the rule of the CCP.

The current Chinese state can be described as following a neo-developmentalist model (Köpke 2018: 320): a hybrid of a developmentalist state, with a high modernist (Scott 1998: 4–6) mission to better the lot of its citizens through grand technologies and state interventions, and a capitalist society striving to create wealth through the pursuit of self-interest. The "new developmentalism" gives more room to private enterprise than the older *dirigisme*, but the nation state retains a strong role as investor, constructor of infrastructure, and planner and creator of public and private wealth. It is primarily an alternative model to the neo-liberal "Washington Consensus" (Ban 2012). This neo-developmentalist vision, it must be acknowledged, retains its dedication to technological progress, nationalist grandness and the creation of wealth – in other words, to all values attached to "development". Hence, when talking about neo-developmentalism, one might like to ponder the meaning of development. In the political and economic sense used today, the term came to prominence after World War II; in the scope of modernisation theory, it signified adapting a social, technological and economic pathway leading in stages towards the "developed", industrialised nations of the West (Menzel 2010: 77–97). In post-colonial thought and in Marxist-influenced dependency theory, "development" has been denounced as a Trojan Horse of neo-colonialism, as a tool to continue the dominance of the periphery by the core by other means (Escobar 2012). Yet post-opening China has wholeheartedly embraced development, and with it modernist concepts of technological

and social progress. Chinese concepts of development are a melange of Marxist teleology (Wang 1998: 13) and ancient concepts of China as "the middle kingdom", a great civilization surrounded barbarian homelands, creating "alternative modernities" (Hartnett 2017: 103). This particular concept of modernity and progress has deeply influenced the Chinese neo-developmentalist model.

The PRC is not the only emerging economy to merge a capitalist, export-oriented economy containing more than just traces of neo-liberalism with a strong, interventionist state. Yet the special character of the Chinese neo-developmentalist model – sometimes simply called "the China model" (Zhao 2010) – lies in its authoritarianism and its increasing nationalism. Especially this nationalism, interpreted as expansionism by Western pundits (Holslag 2015, Miller 2017), has created anxieties among neighbours and regional powers. What is important here is how the nationalist, authoritarian neo-developmentalist state works within its borders.

Earlier observers saw a strong contradiction inherent in the drive for prosperity and modernity, one between the aspirations towards civil liberties found in Western capitalist nations and the promises of socialism-cum-market economy (Menzel 1990). Yet during the last four decades, it has become increasingly clear that a growth-driven capitalist development model oriented towards the world market, but strongly led by the Party state, had become highly successful. The high growth rates enjoyed by China since the early 1980s seemed to confirm the validity of its development model – not only to the world, but, as importantly, to its citizens. However – and this seems to be an issue here – not all of China's citizens profit from the economic boom in the same manner. Indeed, national minorities in the fringe area of the Chinese state are disproportionately poor and "underdeveloped". This has been addressed since 2000 by China's Great Western Development Strategy. The "West" here comprises the provinces and autonomous regions of Gansu, Guizhou, Ningxia, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Tibet, Xinjiang and Yunnan, and also Chongqing Municipality; yet IMAR and Guangxi, although not technically "western", are also included in the programme (China.org.cn). In the scope of the Great Western Development Strategy, between 2000 and 2016 China had invested 6.35 trillion yuan (USD 914 billion) in the resource-rich regions of the West. Among the infrastructure constructed in the scope of the programme were highways and railway lines, including the Qinghai-Tibet railway, which rendered the Tibetan Plateau much more accessible. Furthermore, grand hydraulic schemes were implemented in the context of the strategy. In the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020), the Chinese government now intends to merge the ongoing Western Development Strategy with the Belt and Road Initiative, linking the Western regions to their neighbours in Central and West Asia, as well as Southeast and South Asia (Xinhua 2016). This is an ob-

vious decision, as both the Great Western Development Strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative are primarily concerned with infrastructure development as a means to uphold economic growth. The 13th Five-Year-Plan promises the region "an additional 8,751 kilometres of highways, 3,219 km of new high-speed railroads and 187 gigawatts of power capacity" (Wang 2018). In the case studies, we will try to observe how minority unrest, government responses and development issues are tied together.

3. Case Studies

3.1. Tibetan Autonomous Region

Tibet represents probably the most prominent case of ethnic turmoil in the People's Republic, a case that has been shaped by history, by outsiders romanticising Tibetan Buddhism, by the fervent nationalist policies of the Chinese government and, more recently, by concerted development efforts. Although culturally Tibet encompasses more than the TAR, namely also parts of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan (Crowe 2013: 1100), this case study is confined to the autonomous region. Tibet and China have shared a complex history. Once an independent kingdom, Tibet had to accept the Chinese emperors as suzerains from the medieval Yuan dynasty on, but it had always been autonomous to a large degree. After the downfall of the Qing, Tibet formally declared independence, a status never accepted by China, which sees Tibet as a centuries-old integral part of its territory. The Communist People's Republic annexed Tibet in 1951 and quashed a major uprising in 1959 (Goldstein 1997). This led to the Indian exile of the Tibetan government and the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. These events established the political status quo, in which China effectively rules over Tibet as part of its national territory.

Since then, the Tibetan independence movement had been a constant thorn in the side of the CCP leadership. Through the international popularity of the Dalai Lama, the Tibet independence movement has managed to garner remarkable support. Western perception of the Tibetan conflict has often been driven by romanticism and a quest for spirituality surrounding Tibetan Buddhism (Dodin / Räther 2001, Lopez 1999), as well as by the demonisation of the Chinese as invaders. The CCP in turn tends to portray the historical conflict in Tibet as a battle against feudalism and theocracy supported by Western imperialism (Information Office 2013). The Dalai Lama is described as "a political exile who has attempted to split Tibet from China under the cloak of religion" (Xinhua 2017).

The year 2008 saw a surge of Tibetan protests against Chinese policies in the Autonomous Region. This unrest was apparently long planned to coincide with the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, as the independence movement seized the opportunity to shed a light on the Tibet question (Tethong 2018). An – albeit highly biased – report put together by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA 2010), as the Tibetan government-in-exile (unrecognised by China) chooses to call itself, details the unfolding of the unrest. According to the report, mass protests began on 10 March 2008, the 49th anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising. They started with a peaceful protest by over 300 monks in Lhasa that was broken up by the People's Armed Police (PAP). Subsequently protests by Buddhist clergy and laypeople spread across TAR and the neighbouring provinces Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu, where Tibetans make up considerable parts of the population. Police retaliation was severe, including the use of firearms and curfews. Protests continued throughout March, and, to a lesser extent over the following two months, finally ebbing after June (TBA 2010: 167), as the government deployed more troops to Tibet and thousands of protesters were arrested. Altogether, there were 153 Tibetans confirmed killed (not only in the TAR, but all over the country), most of them shot dead (TBA 2010: 168–169).

Since the 2008 wave of unrest, self-immolation has become the chosen method of protest among ethnic Tibetans. There have supposedly been up to 150 cases of self-immolation in Tibet, according to Western advocacy groups, and some of the protesters are mere teenagers (Free Tibet Campaign 2018). The motives of the monks, nuns and laypeople choosing to set themselves on fire are not entirely clear; according to Barnett (2012), the two conflicting theories are that this method of protest is either promoted by outside forces, namely exiled Tibetans – a stance taken by the Chinese government and Chinese scholars – or that it represents a rational if desperate form of protest against the socio-economic and political situation in the region. There are some indications that a major source of grievance lies in the harsh measures against Tibetan Buddhism, including the denunciation of the Dalai Lama as an "agent of imperialism" and the raiding of monasteries.

The fear of separatism, identified with "religious extremism", looms large within the Communist Party, so that tightening control over TAR through development is seen as a high priority policy measure. As quoted by Wu Yingjie, Communist Party Secretary of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, President Xi Jiping has said: "To govern the nation, one must govern the borders; to govern the borders, we must first stabilize Tibet" (Reuters 2017). Here the direction for the Chinese government's handling of the Tibetan question becomes apparent: Tibet plays a crucial role in Chinese geopolitical thinking.

Tibet is to be part of a "Himalaya Economic Rim" project with neighbouring India, Bhutan and Nepal (Tibet.cn 2015), which is meant to connect to the

Belt and Road Initiative; however, the latest military tensions in the Himalayan region between India and China make a rapid expansion of this particular project unlikely. It has also been asserted that the integration of TAR into the BRI is mostly the ambition of the local government in the Autonomous Region, and that Tibet does not play a significant role in the plans for the BRI (Bhutia 2016); hence the potential of the BRI to boost economic growth has been seen as overrated. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Tibet is experiencing rapid economic development.

The Qinghai-Tibet railway has made TAR more accessible and has thus drawn it closer to the Chinese core, which is only one sign of the increasing integration of the region into China's national economy. This integration has a rationale, since the Tibetan Autonomous Region is rich in natural resources and has an abundance of exploitable hydropower potential (Shapiro 2016: 118–123). As energy is a prerequisite for China's economic growth, the government constantly seeks to access new sources of energy. Energy generated in hydroelectric plants on the mountainous Tibetan plateau is to be sent eastwards through the West-East Power Transmission project. It is estimated that TAR has a capacity of 140 gigawatts, about 25% of the total potential national capacity (Chen 2016). Hydroelectricity is important for China to be able to reach its renewable energy goals.

TAR has benefited from direct budget subsidies from the Chinese government for decades (Fischer 2014: 2–3) in order to be able to develop, underlining the priority the Chinese leadership has assigned to the region. However, Andrew Martin Fischer (2014) argues that the development of Tibet is a top-down process in which all major decisions are taken by the CCP; ethnic Tibetans are not fully agents of their fate but are time and again subjected to development strategies planned out elsewhere. Ben Hillman (2016) argues that failure on the side of the TAR regional government to effectively pre-empt public unrest through "conflict-sensitive policies" (Hillman 2016: 20) can be found in the way the CCP trains and grooms its cadres, in practices of patronage and career-seeking amongst these cadres and in the neglect of cultural concerns among those populations affected by development.

Apart from the religious matters discussed above, among the major grievances of Tibetans seem to be environmental degradation and other pressures on traditional rural livelihoods. Lhasa, TAR's capital, is rapidly expanding its urban areas and receives a lot of Han in-migration; ethnic relations in the city appear to be extraordinarily tense (Fischer 2014). Another prominent example is the semi-forced sedentarisation and resettlement of pastoralists on the Tibetan Plateau through state officials, a process that began in Tibet (Yeh 2005, Human Rights Watch 2013) but would later be extended to other regions, such as Inner Mongolia, as discussed below. The Tibetan regional government has made "ecological protection" one of its official policy priorities

and says it has spent 10 billion yuan on ecological construction projects in 2018, emphasising reforestation as one central measure. In an article published in the *China Daily* (Nyima / Daqiong 2019), relocation of Tibetan nomads is portrayed as voluntary and beneficial to the relocated. Yeh (2009) criticises the Party's own framing of western development as "greening", which she views as a form of territorialisation, of imposing government control over the large spaces of the Tibetan Plateau.

Given that the CCP invests the Tibetan Autonomous Region with the highest geopolitical importance, as discussed above (matched only by the Taiwan question), and taking into consideration the rapid, state-controlled economic development of the region, I would like to emphasise that TAR is subject to territorialisation. This includes the "zoning" of development, a state-sanctioned planning that delineates whether spaces are set aside for nature protection or resource exploitation. The facilitation of easier access to Han in-migrants and the fervent policing of political dissent reinforces the impression that Tibet is to be incorporated into "China proper" at considerable cost.

3.2. Inner Mongolia

Ethnic tensions in Inner Mongolia are far less prominently debated in international media than in the cases of Xinjiang and Tibet. Inner Mongolia appears to be more firmly controlled by the CCP than the other two regions, perhaps due to its proximity to Beijing, or to the high ratio of Han to ethnic minorities. Like other Inner Asian regions, Mongolia was acquired by the Qing dynasty, which divided it into Inner and Outer Mongolia (which later became the independent Republic of Mongolia). From 1902, a wave began of what Bulag (2004: 85–86) calls the colonisation of Inner Mongolia, not unlike that of the American West. The Qing set up a new Bureau of Cultivation that was given the task of developing the frontier territories. Pastureland was transformed for agricultural use, and hundred of thousands of Han Chinese immigrated to the newly opened steppe lands. This turned the tables on the population ratio in the areas of today's IMAR; 2.2 million immigrants were recorded in 1912, while there were only 877,000 Mongols, a population declining due to wide-spread male celibacy, poor medical conditions and overall harsh living conditions (Burjgin / Bilik 2003: 55–56). By 1947, the Han had become the uncontested majority population, outnumbering ethnic Mongols in a ratio of more than four to one (Banister 2001: 272).

In 1939, parts of Inner Mongolia where occupied by Japanese forces. After the Second World War, Mongolians allied themselves with the CCP in exchange for promises of widespread cultural autonomy, and the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region was founded in 1947, even two years before the

PRC. Yet the Cultural Revolution laid open the stark contradiction between radicalised Maoist (Han) students and party youth and the ethnic identities represented by the ethnic Mongols. Furthermore, communist Mongolian cadres were accused of conspiring with the Soviets and the People's Republic of Mongolia (PRM) in order to establish a "re-unified" Mongolia. Allegedly, a clandestine new Inner Mongolian Party (*neirendang*) was in existence among CCP cadres in Mongolia (Han 2013: 92).

The Mongolian language was temporarily banned to quench ethnic nationalism. The revolutionary zeal of the Red Guards took a heavy toll on IMAR and its ethnic Mongols (Brown 2007: 183–185), as the region descended increasingly into chaos and violence. More than twenty thousand Mongols were killed and over three hundred thousand injured in the 1967–1969 period of the Cultural Revolution (Bulag 2004: 93). The Maoist Red Guards, predominantly Han, targeted Buddhist lamas and members of the former pre-revolutionary Mongol elite. Monasteries were ransacked and any expression of traditional Mongolian culture or Buddhist religion became dangerous. The confusion and terror of the Cultural Revolution led to a discontinuation of Mongolian cultural and religious practices and a stark increase in ethnic tensions (Sneath 1994). Inner Mongolia experienced a student movement of ethnic Mongolian youth in 1981 and a subsequent crackdown by the Chinese state (Jankowiak 1988); thereafter, however, the region was calm for decades.

The first instance of unrest in a long time appeared in 2011, when an ethnic Mongol herder was deliberately run over and killed by a Han truck driver (Jacobs 2011). The pastoralist had tried to block the truck from access to his grassland. The event sparked protests across IMAR, including the autonomous region's capital, Hohhot. Police soon clamped down on the movement, declaring martial law in Hohhot, Tongliao and Chifeng and imposing curfews (Yu Zhou 2011). Since the initial protest wave in 2011, demonstrations of mostly pastoralist Mongolians have frequently occurred in Inner Mongolia, mostly centred on questions of land rights, environmental degradation and cultural rights. The above-mentioned resettlement programmes are also among the grievances of the protesters. Protest banners have sported slogans such as "Protect Our Grassland", highlighting the strong connection of herders to their environment (Wu 2011).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Inner Mongolia has rapidly been turned into a resource frontier. It is among the largest coal-producing regions of the PRC and hosts numerous sites for the extraction of rare earth elements (China Daily 2013). The industrial transformation of the Autonomous Region has direly impacted the environment, including water resources and the grassland ecosystem of the steppe, adding to the desertification already underway. This poses a problem for herders belonging to the Mongolian ethnicity, as environmental degradation adversely impacts their animals and endangers

their livelihoods. Despite a remarkable turn towards renewable energies, China's economy is still highly reliant on fossil fuels to power its industries, hence domestic coal consumption remains high and Inner Mongolia an important location for the Chinese coal mining industry.

As mentioned above, the autonomous region contains important deposits of rare earth elements, valuable minerals needed for a large number of high-tech products, from wind turbines and batteries for electric cars to high-resolution screens (The Economist 2009). The mining and processing of rare earths is associated with considerable ecological costs (Bontron 2012, Kaiman 2014), and the villagers and especially Mongol pastoralists in the vicinity of rare earths mines appear to be bearing the largest burden of this environmental degradation. They protest the contamination of water and land, yet reportedly to no avail (Engel 2015).

Inner Mongolia is going through a process of territorialisation that has been ongoing for more than a century (Banister 2001, Bulag 2004, Han 2011). After the Cultural Revolution, which spelled disaster for Han-Mongol relations (Brown 2007), the territorialisation of Inner Mongolia was marked not so much by violent repression (which still occurred) but by economic development, further intensifying and accelerating by the turn of the 21st century. The exploitation of natural resources was the main driver of this economic development. But culturally, the rapid economic modernisation of IMAR is accompanied by absurd phenomena such as "ghost cities" (Woodworth / Wallace 2017) – uninhabited wastelands of unsustainable housing and urbanisation policies – or the commodification of Mongol traditional culture as a tourist spectacle (Buckley et al. 2008). Territorialisation in Inner Mongolia remains an intense process that is met by decisive, yet peaceful local resistance (Köpke 2018: 167–192); the Chinese state tends to criminalise Mongol protests. However, the territorialisation here is less overtly violent and more structured by resource extraction than in the other two cases. Perhaps the Chinese party state perceives the danger of armed separatism here to be much lower than in Tibet or Xinjiang.

3.3. Xinjiang

Like Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang has long been a resource frontier. After the foundation of the PRC, the region functioned not only as a site for nuclear bomb tests, but also as a region of oil exploration and later drilling. This economic activity mainly motivated Han in-migration into the region inhabited principally by Turkic ethnicities, namely Uighurs and Kazakhs (Cliff 2016). Besides Tibet, Xinjiang appears to be the frontier that is culturally and economically least integrated into the Chinese state, something that the Party

hopes to ameliorate. While the Belt and Road Initiative serves these purposes, the transformation of Xinjiang is not only economic, but also accompanied by strong political pressure.

The Chinese government's campaign in Xinjiang has only lately, in 2018, begun to make headlines again. Under the label "Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism", China has allegedly begun to set up numerous re-education camps designed to detain and "transform" Muslim Uighurs. The closed facilities supposedly use methods such as writing self-criticism essays, long lectures and singing songs in praise of the Party as means of indoctrination (Buckley 2018). These measures are aimed at severing inmates' cultural and emotional ties to Islam.

It appears that the system of interment camps also, at least in part, contains elements of what could be described as forced labour (Feng 2018). This is reminiscent of the *laojiao* system, officially abolished in 2013, characterised as "re-education through labour". Official sources point to the success of Xinjiang's "anti-terrorism" measures, claiming the centres are "vocational education and training centres" that help in "promoting social development". They point to the economic development in the region and paint the image of an overall peaceful and secure life for Xinjiang's population (Liu 2018). Over the last months, evidence has mounted that state activities in Xinjiang go far beyond anti-terrorist measures. Modern surveillance technology, including face-recognition software and smartphone tracking, appears to be increasingly ubiquitous (Cockerell 2019). Worshippers who take part in Islamic ceremonies are monitored and pressured to demonstrate their loyalty to the Communist state. According to research published by Western news media, a number of mosques have been torn down since 2016 (Kuo 2019).

The background to the detainment and cultural suppression campaign can be found in inter-ethnic conflict and insurgency. Data from UCDP, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2018), suggest that terrorism and counter-insurgency in Xinjiang, as well as related ethnic conflicts between Uighurs and Han Chinese, make up the deadliest armed conflicts within China's borders in the 21st century. Interethnic strife peaked in July 2009, when a demonstration in the autonomous region's capital Urumqi escalated into anti-Han riots, which were in turn met by Han retaliation against Uighurs. UCDP counts 187 confirmed deaths connected to this event.

Another related conflict is rooted in the insurgent activities of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM, an allegedly al-Qaeda affiliated group of Jihadi Muslims of Uighur origin, attacked a police station and other facilities in 2008, initiating an armed conflict. The conflict is apparently strongly framed within the context of the "Global War on Terrorism" popularised by US President George W. Bush (2001). This narrative is clearly used in the policing of political discontent in Xinjiang. At the same time, it allows

China to accuse Western governments of applying double standards (Ai 2018): How can the United States and its Western allies criticise the rather "benign" activities of the Chinese government when the US itself is carrying out targeted killings against suspected jihadi terrorists through drone warfare?

Clarke (2007) argues that the Chinese government has itself contributed to the insecurity of the region's non-Han ethnicities by promoting a discourse of a "triumvirate of radical Islam, underdevelopment and international 'terrorism'" (p. 324) haunting Xinjiang and compromising Chinese national unity. By securitising the issue of national identity, the Chinese government has contributed to the emergence of Sunni Muslim militancy. In another instance, Clarke (2015) deplores the "palestinization" of Xinjiang, an analogy that appears to be mostly inaccurate, yet suggests an atmosphere of military occupation and popular resistance.

Unlike Tibet, Xinjiang is indeed an essential part of the Belt and Road Initiative as it contains the most important corridor to reach the Central Asian nations and then further expand the proposed Belt towards Europe. The enormous political resources spent on the securitisation or stabilisation of the region can and must be partly explained by the centrality of Xinjiang in the BRI. Vice versa, the BRI explains the pivot to the West and the intensification of attempts to "pacify" the Xinjiang hinterland, which has suddenly become central to Chinese infrastructure policy. Mass surveillance, detainment camps, interventions in religious life and the construction of transport infrastructure are all signs of a massive drive to territorialise Xinjiang as part of the Chinese border spaces.

4. Territorialisation through development in Chinese Inner Asia

The Belt and Road Initiative has emerged as the central spatial vision of the current Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping. It aims to tie together China's core and periphery with trade partners in South, Southeast and Central Asia, on the African continent and in Europe. China's infrastructure drive can be seen, in the words of Marxist geographer David Harvey (2001), as a "spatial fix", a measure to counter the economic crisis caused by over-accumulation through the geographic expansion and restructuring of capital, and this approach has indeed been applied (Zhang 2017). It arises in the context of the "new normal" in which China has downscaled its expectations of economic growth, slowing to single-digit values between 6 and 7 per cent (Zhou / Xin 2019).

Xi Jinping's speech on 18 December 2018 commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Open Door Policy (China Daily 2018) highlights the dedication of the country's leadership to a number of core principles, including the ongoing struggle to improve the prosperity of the people, the unquestioned rule of the CCP and the course of "socialism with Chinese characteristics". Development and stability are presented as the overarching goals of Chinese policy. The era of Xi Jinping has been perceived as a turn towards an expansionist, more authoritarian, more aggressively nationalistic policy set (Holslag 2015, Ross / Bekkevold 2016, Ringen 2016, Khan 2018). Yet to the minority populations of Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, there is more continuity than change; while all three regions may have recently experienced more severe clampdowns on dissent, authoritarian policies were also a major feature of the previous leadership strategy. They are part of an overarching "carrot and stick" policy.

The situation in the autonomous regions of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet is characterised by their frontier aspect. The latter two, in particular, are extreme cases, as anyone would acknowledge (Zang 2015: 135–164), and one cannot generalise state policies towards minorities from the measures directed at Uighurs and Tibetans. The national minority cultures tend to be the subject of a slightly condescending, folkloristic curiosity (Baranovitch 2001), while their actual lifestyles are under pressure to modernise and adapt to majority culture (Gladney 2004, Ludwig 2009). Yet nowhere else does state territorialisation appear to be as urgent, as violent and as tied to political economy as in the three cases discussed above. So the central question appears to be: Are the causes of conflicts between the Chinese state and the minorities discussed in the three case studies cultural, economic or geopolitical? The answer I would advocate for is: all of the above. The concept of territorialisation is attractive because it includes both cultural and material aspects while resolutely retaining a spatial perspective. To put it in plain words: the conflicts are over land and resources as much as over people and people's beliefs, and all of these factors are intertwined and inseparable.

I argue that the opening up of regions in the scope of the Great Western Development, and the planning and implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, not only serve the production of economic growth, but are also processes of state territorialisation in the sense elaborated by Vandergeest and Peluso. The emphasis on the social production of space in the scope of state-led territorialisation emphasises the projection of political power over notions of "ethnic strife". As Dru Gladney (2004: 51–64) reminds us, the idea of "Han-ness", of a majority Chinese identity, is itself a social construct. Some important anthropological works (Pasternak / Salaff 2018, Cliff 2016) have carefully laid out the very heterogeneous, localised experiences of the Han people in spaces like Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, experiences of identity

reaffirmation, but also of cultural adaptation. The analytical turn towards a spatial perspective avoids the trap of an ethnic essentialism, while providing a clear view of the power asymmetries that accompany and promote state territorialisation. I see the development of the Western regions more as an instrument of state power over territories inhabited by non-Han people, rather than as a sign of expansionism aimed at neighbouring peoples. In this sense, these intertwined development programmes are driven by geopolitics, but within China, not necessarily as some kind of "Great Game" in Asia. There is evidence that the Communist Party understands the dangers of "imperial overstretch" (Blumenthal 2017) and takes every measure to consolidate its power within the country, including countering any kind of activity that reeks faintly of separatism or regime change. This is a consistent rationality of the Chinese leadership and probably a historical lesson from the break-up of the Soviet Union.

The very raison d'être – and hence greatest source of legitimacy – of the Communist Party is development, and the unfettered belief in progress and improvement of the nation's welfare drives its politics. Therefore it should come as no surprise that in the current situation it would direct its development efforts at the fringe regions that appear to be underdeveloped, unstable and not properly integrated into the whole of the Chinese nation. However, repressive policies may backfire, engendering new identity politics and ethno-nationalist claims for new generations to come. State territorialisation is an unfinished and unstable process that creates its own contradictions.

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