

Violent Paternalism: On the Banality of Uyghur Unfreedom

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Abstract: Since 2016 over one million Chinese civil servants have been ordered to spend a series of weeks visiting assigned Turkic Muslim “relatives.” These mostly Han urbanites have been tasked with instructing Uyghur and Kazakh farmers in political ideology and subjecting them to tests of Chinese nationalism and Han cultural assimilation. When they occupy the homes of their Turkic “relatives” they assess whether or not they should be sent into the mass “reeducation” camp system. Drawing on ethnographic field research, interviews and state documents, this essay argues that the systematic normalization of state-directed violent paternalism has produced a new kind of banality in Turkic minority experiences of unfreedom.

Keywords: Uyghur, Muslim, Xinjiang, education centers, violent paternalism, cultural repression,

child with a book titled *Our China* during an assessment visit to a Uyghur home in 2017. The image was posted by the Xinjiang Communist Youth League on WeChat.

Often, the big brothers and sisters arrived dressed in hiking gear. They appeared in the villages in groups, their backpacks bulging, their luggage crammed with electric water-kettles, rice-cookers, and other useful gifts for their hosts. They were far from home and plainly a bit uncomfortable, reluctant to “rough it” such a long way from the comforts of the city. But these “relatives,” as they had been told to call themselves, were on a mission, so they held their heads high when they entered the Uyghur houses and announced they had come to stay.

The village children spotted the outsiders quickly. They heard their attempted greetings in the local language, saw the gleaming Chinese flags and round face of Xi Jinping pinned to their chests, and knew just how to respond. “I love China,” the children shouted urgently, “I love Father Xi.”

Over the past year, reports have found their way out of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in western China of a campaign of religious and cultural repression of the region’s Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities, and of their detention and confinement in a growing network of razor-wire-ringed camps that China’s government at times has dubbed “transformation through education centers” and at others “counter-extremism training centers” and, recently, amid



A Han “older brother” presents a Uyghur

international criticism, “vocational training centers.”¹ State media has also recently described the mass occupation of minority homes through a “united as one family” program.²

The government describes such efforts as a response to terrorism. Indeed, these camps can be seen as a logical, if grotesque, extension of the government’s decades-long endeavor to eradicate the perceived “terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism” of its ethnic minority Muslim population in the Uyghur homeland. This region, which the state refers to as its “new frontier” (*Xinjiang*), and the country, have certainly experienced spasms of unplanned violence as well as cases of premeditated violence born of Uyghur desperation over decades of dispossession and discrimination.

When the state began to encourage Han settler migration in the Uyghur and Kazakh homelands through a series of “Open Up the West” and “New Silk Road” development initiatives, many people native to the region saw their lands and societies being partitioned by new zoning mechanisms, new Han settlement and the hard infrastructures of commerce. Much of this development centered on state-private partnerships in natural resource extraction and industrial farming which permitted and incentivized the exclusion of Uyghurs and other minorities in favor of Han-dominated corporations and settler communities. These changes led to an inflation in the basic costs of living which in turn produced new forms of poverty and desperation, particularly in Uyghur society.³ Protests over land seizure, police brutality, and competition for jobs in the region in turn prompted widespread state violence toward minority populations. The resulting atmosphere of brutal “crack-downs” or “hard-strike campaigns,” dispossession, and injustice produced a cascading spiral of conflict between Uyghur civilians and the police and Han civilians, both in the province and in other

parts of the country. These incidents, which have been universally blamed on Uyghurs in state discourse, were generally spontaneous, small in scale and defensive responses to police brutality and state violence, rather than anything that resembled an organized insurgency.

The government’s current set of policies through which it is attempting to transform Turkic Muslim societies in general, however, rests on the assumption that most Uyghurs and significant numbers of Kazakhs are terrorists, separatists and extremists-in-waiting. They are presumed to be “unsafe” simply by virtue of their ethnic affiliation, age, employment and travel history. Turkic minorities, especially Uyghurs, who have practiced embodied forms of Islam through regular mosque attendance, studied or taught unauthorized forms of Islam are often automatically detained and sent to the prison camps.

Much reporting has focused on the unprecedented scale and penetration of the surveillance technology deployed to carry out this campaign and on the ways China’s government has pressured other countries to assist in the work of forcibly repatriating Uyghurs living abroad. But less attention has been paid to the mobilization of more than a million Chinese civilians (mostly members of the Han ethnic majority) to aid the military and police in their campaign by occupying the homes of the region’s Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities, and undertaking programs of indoctrination and surveillance, while presenting themselves as older siblings of the men and women they might then decide to consign to the camps.⁴

In spring 2018, as an anthropologist returning to a province where I had spent two years researching Han and Uyghur social life, I met and interviewed Han civilian state workers in predominantly Uyghur urban districts and towns across Southern Xinjiang. Over my time

there and in conversations online, both before and after my visit, I spoke to around a dozen people about the experiences of “big sisters and brothers” in Uyghur and Kazakh homes. They ranged from civilian surveillance workers who performed these visits themselves, to friends and family members of these surveillance workers.

Some of these people were Han friends that I first built relationships with in 2011 when I began my fieldwork in Ürümchi. Others, primarily friends and family members of those directly involved in the program, were acquaintances I made outside of China. Still others were people I met in Ürümchi and Kashgar in 2018.⁵

I wanted to understand how different groups of Han civilians viewed their roles in the human engineering project and why they assented to take part in it. I asked them to describe how they viewed their work and its purpose. I also observed how they interacted with minorities and with one another. I was curious as to whether they would be able to empathize with the Uyghurs and Kazakhs they were involved in “transforming.”

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Mapping out a schedule for the little brothers and sisters was the first order of business. In the mornings, they would sing together at daily flag-raising ceremonies outside the village Party office, at night they would attend classes on Xi Jinping’s vision for a “New China.” The teaching of “culture” would suffuse all the time in between. They would converse in Mandarin and watch approved TV programs, practice Chinese calligraphy, and sing patriotic songs. And all the while the “relatives” would be watching the villagers and taking notes, assessing the Uyghurs’ level of loyalty to their country, noting how well they spoke Chinese, staying alert for signs that their attachment to Islam might be “extreme.”

Had a Uyghur host just greeted a neighbor in Arabic with the words “*Assalamu Alaykum*”? That would need to go in the notebook. Was that a copy of the Quran in the home? Was anyone praying on Friday or fasting during Ramadan? Was a little sister’s dress too long or a little brother’s beard irregular? And why was no one playing cards or watching movies?

Of course it was possible they were doing their home visit in a “healthy” secular family. Perhaps there were posters of Xi Jinping or Chinese flags on their walls. Maybe the children spoke Mandarin even when they hadn’t been prompted.

Not all the most important evidence would be immediately visible. So the visitors were instructed to ask questions. Did their hosts have any relatives living in “sensitive regions?” Did anyone they knew live abroad? Did they have any knowledge of Arabic or Turkish? Had they attended a mosque outside of their village? If the adult little brothers and sisters’ answers felt incomplete, or if they seemed to be hiding anything, the children should be questioned next.

At times, the big brothers and sisters suspected the Uyghurs might be slippery, that however cheerfully they might open their houses or declare their loyalty to the Chinese nation, beneath their smiles and gestures of wholesome secularism there might lurk darker allegiances, uncured attachments to their “diseased” religious ways. But there were simple ways to test for this kind of thing. One could offer a host a cigarette or a sip of beer; a hand could be extended in greeting to a little sibling of the opposite gender, staying alert for signs of flinching. Or one could go out to the market for some freshly ground meat and propose that the family make dumplings. And then wait and watch to see if the Uyghurs would ask what kind of meat was in the bag.

All of this was valuable evidence. Everything that could be detected would be recorded, go

into notebooks and onto the online forms. Everything would be factored into the recommendations the big sisters and brothers would make about which of their hosts would be allowed to remain at home in their villages, with their children, and which ones should be sent away to have their defects repaired by the state.

The “relatives” have been essentially conscripted into service in three separate waves.⁶ The first campaign started in 2014, dispatching some 200,000 Party members, including minority Party members, to “Visit the People, Benefit the People, and Bring Together the Hearts of the People” (*fang minqing, hui minsheng, ju minxin*, 访民情、惠民生、聚民心)—through long-term stays in Uyghur villages.⁷ In 2016, a second wave of 110,000 civil servants were sent into Uyghur villages as part of a “United as One Family” (*jie dui renqin*, 结对认亲) campaign which focused on placing “relatives” in the homes of Uyghurs whose family members had been imprisoned or killed by the police.⁸

In 2017, the third wave of visits began as part of an extension of the 2016 campaign. This third phase of the campaign assigned more than one million civilians to Muslim “relatives” in villages for a series of week-long homestays—often focusing on the extended family of those who had been detained in the drastically-expanded “transformation through education” program.⁹

Following the publication of an earlier version of this article, state media reiterated earlier claims that the “soft policy” program builds “mutual understanding” between “relatives.”¹⁰ In a November 2018 *Global Times* article state authorities stated that 1.1 million civil servants had been assigned to “more than 1.69 million ethnic minority citizens.”¹¹ It also stated that in addition to 49 million distinct

assessment visits “relatives” had carried out more than 11 million ideological training activities since the program began in 2016. In at least some of their week-long visits *Global Times* stated they paid their hosts around seven dollars and seventy cents as compensation for hosting them.



Two sent-down “relatives” (right) share a bed with their Uyghur host. The image was posted by the Xinjiang Communist Youth League on the social media platform WeChat.

Taken as a whole, these three waves of the village-based cadre team program that paired civilian workers with adopted Uyghur and Kazakh families bore a resemblance to other programs that “sent down” state workers and students to learn from the “common people” during the Maoist period of the 1960s and 1970s. What differentiates this state intervention from these similar forced visits is that, in this case, power is flowing from urban civilians as representatives of the state and Han values to rural Uyghur and Kazakh “masses,” as training manuals put it.¹² In the past, urbanites were sent to the countryside to “learn from the masses.”

The “relatives” were given written guidelines on how to conduct themselves. Based on reports from Uyghur contacts in Urumchi and Khotan, such manuals provided guidelines and

forms that needed to be filled out and then digitized for security databases. In a manual that was used in Kashgar prefecture, relatives were given specific instructions on how to get their “relatives” to “let down their guard.”¹³ The manual, which was posted on the Internet but taken down just as this story was going to press, advised “relatives” to show “warmth.” “Don’t lecture right away” it suggested, and show concern regarding their families and bring candy for the children. It provided a checklist that included questions such as: “When entering the household, do family members appear flustered and use evasive language? Do they not watch TV programs at home, and instead only watch VCD discs? Are there any religious items still hanging on the walls of the house?”

The manual instructs the relatives to tell their “little brothers and sisters” that they have been monitoring all Internet and cell phone communication that is coming from the family, so they should not even think about lying when it comes to their knowledge of Islam and religious extremism.

The manual also instructed them to help the villagers alleviate their poverty by giving them business advice and helping out around the household. They were told to report any resistance to “poverty-alleviation activities.”

The civil servants and their relatives that I interviewed came from two distinct groups. Four of them described themselves as “locals” in Xinjiang—“Old Xinjiang People”—and six had moved to the region over the past two decades—“New Xinjiang People.” In many cases, the duration of their relationship to the region seemed to shape how they viewed their role in transforming Uyghur society.

The “New Xinjiang” group evinced pride in serving as “relatives,” and bringing Han “civilization” to Uyghur society. Some spoke

with fervor about the future of the Chinese nation. Some said that China was finally becoming an equal of other great nations. Some talked about the nationalistic action film *Wolf Warrior II* and said it made them proud to be Chinese.¹⁴ Without a hint of irony, some of them called each other “comrades”—a term that has not been used in this manner in everyday Chinese political discourse since the Maoist period between 1949 and the late 1970s. Now, many were proud and united under the new type of Chinese ideology they were bringing to Turkic minorities.

People from the “New Xinjiang” group sounded like true believers. Some said they wanted to play a role in a flourishing of Chinese nationalism that would subsume Uyghur society in Chineseness. It was their duty to educate Uyghurs, they told me. A young man from Guangdong who had been in Xinjiang only for several years told me, “These Uyghurs are just uneducated, it is not their fault they began to practice these extremist forms of Islam. They’ve been misled by hardened extremists. They don’t know any better.” The visits from state workers, he told me, had improved security. He said, “Now I’m not even afraid when I enter a Uyghur village. Things are much better now.”



A sent-down state “relative” (left) reads

Xi Jinping’s report for the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party to her Uyghur host. The image was posted by the Xinjiang Communist Youth League on WeChat.

Several of those I spoke with who came from the “New Xinjiang” group told me they had heard rumors of Han civilians being killed by local Uyghurs when they had first arrived in 2014. The same young man from Guangdong, a fan of anime and Western movies who worked for a tourism bureau, told me that the threat was no longer imminent. He said, “I heard that initially a number of Han workers were killed when they went to sensitive Uyghur villages. When women went for a walk after dinner, Uyghur men grabbed them and slit their throats.” He made a slashing motion with his finger across his throat. “There is a lot we ordinary people don’t know about the seriousness of the terrorism problem,” he said. “What we do know is something has to be done.”

Now, he felt, the immediate threat of terrorism was no longer an issue. Since 2017, conditions were very safe for Han civilians in Uyghur villages. Still he said that “relatives” were not permitted to walk outside alone when they were in the villages. Instead, they traveled in groups of three, with at least one male civil servant as a precaution.

Two civil servant “relatives” and two friends and family members of “relatives,” all four of whom identified as “locals” (*bendi ren* 本地人) or “Old Xinjiang People” who had grown up in the region, expressed reservations about their participation in the “United as One Family” project. They complained about having to adjust to conditions in Uyghur and Kazakh villages; that the work was boring and they missed the excitement of city life. They

repeatedly mentioned that it was inconvenient to be apart from their families. One of the relatives who was sent in the first wave of long-term relatives, and was tasked with living full time in Muslim villages for a year or more, said he was only permitted a 10-day leave every 90 days.

They told me, repeatedly, that they felt they were being asked to sacrifice significant portions of their lives to this effort. They wanted to get back to their work as managers in state-owned enterprises and government bureaus, or their work as doctors and editors in state-run institutions. They missed their homes and families in the city. Two of those I interviewed told me that they, or their friends who had been asked to go down to the villages, would have lost their jobs if they had refused to participate in the monitoring program, but they also said that by participating they had been guaranteed promotions upon the completion of their tour of duty.

Beginning in September 2017, I exchanged online messages with the daughter of a mid-level manager of a state-owned enterprise in Urumchi who was one of the 110,000 civilians sent to live in “sensitive” villages on a long-term basis in 2016. She had recently visited her father and observed the work he was doing in the villages. She was eager to describe what she had seen and what she thought of the process. She said that as an “Old Xinjiang” person, her father had no long-standing grievances with Uyghurs, though they did have friends who had been injured during the Uyghur-rights protests and violence of 2009. His daughter said he had slept on average no longer than six hours each night during his 90-day stays in a Uyghur village with a team of eight to 10 people made up of both Han and Uyghur civilians. He was required to work so hard assessing his host families, inputting assessment data and attending meetings that

he had little time to sleep.

The daughter, a woman in her late 20s who loves cats and Lady Gaga and now lives in the U.S., explained that her father had been “forced into this assignment” and that, while the government had pushed all the teams of “relatives” really hard to be harsh, her father had “fought back” and had tried to make the rules a bit more flexible so as not to hurt the feelings of the locals [Uyghurs]. That, she told me, was all he could do at the moment.

She said she had heard that some workers had received death threats from Uyghurs in the villages, but she said this was “before they got to know them.” She explained that the reason for this was “because Uyghurs had lost trust in the government, or anyone sent by the government.” To her thinking, it was not because of anything the “relatives” had done. It was simply because Uyghurs misunderstood their mission.

Several days after that exchange, I told her I had shared what she told me with Uyghur contacts. They had laughed at the idea that her father could protect Uyghur feelings while simultaneously monitoring what they said. To them, people like her father were government spies who only pretended to be friendly. They said they’d never trust such a person, but they would act friendly toward him because they were terrified that if they didn’t he might report what they said and they’d be taken away.

In response to this, the young woman wrote: “It is very easy to laugh and be suspicious of [their] efforts, and not to appreciate that maybe there still are people trying to fight back and find a solution.”

She argued that her father was trying to make a difference within his role as a “relative” by not purposely insulting the Uyghurs he was sent to monitor, and allowing them to maintain some of their dignity.

“My dad is not a spy, and he is trying his best. He’d lost 10 pounds last time I saw him, and every day he told me how hard he finds his place to be. And yet, he has to complete his daily job and try to comfort the families in a personal way.”

Still, as I continued to interview her, she undermined that defense. She told me her father was tasked with visiting “each household in the village in teams of two or three” every day for 90 days at a time to infer “whether the families had some ties with the ‘terrorist groups.’”

She said she believed that Xinjiang had been a “terrorism target” in the past, and that poorer villages were where “terrorist ideology” had been allowed to grow. It made sense that her father and the other long-term “relatives” were sent to these villages; not only was her father making Xinjiang safer, he was also helping villagers to understand the value of being secular.

In fact, she said, since most Uyghurs in these villages were illiterate, he also had to consider their “education level” when it came to determining which Uyghurs should be sent to the “reeducation centers.” Those who had a difficult time “blending in to ‘mainstream culture’” were either sent to the “reeducation centers” or required to attend political education classes at night or on the weekend.

The main focus of all of this training, she told me, was to introduce secular values into Uyghur society. To her mind, this was an unquestioned good. She said the main problem in Xinjiang was that people did not communicate effectively. Education in both Chinese language and Han secular values would change this. She told me, “Xinjiang could be another Yunnan, where people from outside the province are attracted to the province and those from the province are assimilated.”



A visiting Han civil servant asks a Uyghur villager if he smokes or drinks liquor, and the two drink together. This image was posted on social media platform Meipian by the Han civil servant in a diary article about his homestay experience.

In general, five Uyghurs who spoke to me about the arrival of the “relatives” described them with a mixture of contempt and fear. They described themselves as feeling infantilized and stripped of their dignity. Many of them told me every aspect of their life felt like a political test. None of them seemed to have any hope that the “relatives” would notice the sadness and difficulty of their lives, and therefore refuse to carry out their orders to reengineer Uyghur society.

As one Uyghur middle-aged man, whose family members were government workers in Khotan, wrote me, “These Han state workers may have more sympathy for the farmers after seeing the abject poverty they live in or their contempt for Uyghurs might increase as a result of their visits. Their perception of the ‘backwardness’ of Uyghurs and their own superiority as Han might be reinforced through this process.”

Many Uyghurs told me that perhaps the most painful part of the “United as One Family”

program was the way it undermined the authority of Uyghur parents and destroyed families. They described the “relatives” as trying to take away their future. Families and their faith, many explained, were the last space of refuge and security in Uyghur society. The same middle-aged Uyghur man said, “Now they are taking our families and our faith. We have nothing left.”

During their visits, the civil servants spent a great deal of time ensuring that the education of Uyghur children was conducted in Chinese and that it contained patriotic elements about New China and deemphasized their difference as minorities. The manual that was posted online specifically encouraged the targeting of Uyghur children as a way of getting to the truth of the situation.¹⁵



Sent-down state workers monitor the use of Mandarin Chinese in a Uyghur children’s classroom. Image posted by Xinjiang Normal University.

In many of the ongoing human engineering projects in the Uyghur homeland, it appears that the state is attempting to separate Uyghur children from their parents and from Uyghur language education by radically increasing the number of Chinese-

speaking teachers, and using the system of penal centers to reduce the influence of Uyghur cultural values and norms in the lives of children.¹⁶ In schools across the region, Mandarin is the only language of instruction, a policy that is now strictly enforced by the detention of minority instructors who are accused of being “two-faced” in their approach to national policy.¹⁷

One Uyghur young man I’ll call Alim, whose older brother was taken in January 2018, was terrified of what would happen to his nieces and nephew if his sister-in-law was also taken. The young man, a fluent Chinese speaker who wore skinny jeans and an Apple watch, said his older brother had visited Turkey as a tourist. He thought it likely this was the reason he had been taken away. He said his sister-in-law “still acts a little bit defiant when the state workers come to her home, so I worry that they will decide she needs to be reeducated too. If that happens, her children will become wards of the state.” Indeed, news reports and government construction tenders posted online suggest a surge in orphanage construction in Xinjiang. Alim told me of course he and his parents would be happy to care for his nieces and nephew, but he said that he had heard many reports of extended family being prevented from caring for the children of those who were detained.

His voice shaking, he said: “They want to take our children away from us. My nephew is eight years old. He already is being affected by this. He is quiet all the time now.”

He said that the last time he saw a real smile on his nephew’s face was when he opened a gift “from his father” on his birthday. “We told him that his father had sent him Legos from Beijing. We told him his father is in Beijing on business. He was so happy.”

Many of the sent-down “relatives,” both “Old

Xinjiang” locals and more recent Han settlers, that I spoke to did not have a clear sense of what life in the “transformation through reeducation” centers was like. Both groups described the places where Muslims were sent as “schools” where Muslims were educated in modern Chinese life.

When I pressed further, one of the “New Xinjiang” settlers, the young man from Guangdong, told me that the “schools” were like rehabilitation centers for drug users. He said they knew that it must be hard on people who were sent there and on their families, but that the cost of not intervening was too high. Echoing a frequent trope in Chinese state-media reports, he described extremist ideology as a disease. It had to be “cured.” The young man from Guangdong told me, “These Uyghurs are being treated like drug addicts who are going through rehab.”

Sent-down workers who identified as “Old Xinjiang” locals had a less sanguine view of the camps. They said that when Uyghurs were sent to a “reeducation center,” it was probably because there was no one to protect them. This was how the system worked. And it was also why “locals” like them had to participate. “There is nothing we can do to protect Uyghurs,” a middle-aged Han woman who grew up with Uyghur classmates in Urumchi told me, “so we have to try to protect ourselves.” Faced with the impossibility of protecting Turkic minorities from state violence, some Han civilians disengaged from the Uyghur friends and simply attempted to insulate themselves from the violence.

Several Han workers said that politics in Xinjiang were polarized to a degree that recalled the Cultural Revolution. Everyone had to agree with the Party line or be ostracized and face time in prison. Of course, they said the primary target of the current human engineering project was Uyghurs and Kazakhs. If they, as Han, kept their heads down, they

thought they would be fine.

They worried, however, about the future. One elderly “Old Xinjiang” woman said, “I don’t know what will happen if we ever let the Uyghurs out.”

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Regardless of whether they were new arrivals to Xinjiang or older residents, many Han “relatives” and their friends and family told me that in public they had to express complete support for the campaign. In online articles that their work units asked them to write, Han state workers framed the challenge of the weeks they spent in Uyghur homes as a way of demonstrating their willingness to sacrifice for the nation and their concern for Uyghurs. The stories and images they publish fall in line with the campaign’s slogans: “Visit the People, Benefit the People, and Bring Together the Hearts of the People!” and “United as One Family.”

Some posted images of themselves immersing Muslim minorities in “Xi Jinping Thought” by reading a text aloud. One posted an image of her and her “relative” bent over a video player watching political speeches. Even the state workers who grumbled about disruptions in their personal lives seemed to accept their role as self-valORIZED “big brothers and sisters” to their “little” Uyghur siblings. Many of them seemed to view calling a Uyghur man their father or younger brother was an act of endearment, a sign of openness on the part of a Han civil servant. As the daughter of the middle-manager told me regarding her father’s work as a long-term “relative” in a “sensitive” village: “Now that he has spent 10 months living in the village, the locals treat him like family.”

One young female “relative” wrote about the experience of asking an elderly Uyghur man to watch a video-recorded speech from a Party leader with her: “I felt like I was just like his

daughter!”¹⁸

In their blog posts, they noted the way Uyghur children embraced their teaching or Uyghur mothers eagerly posed for pictures. They saw these actions as signs of hospitality and warmth. The “United as One Family” project seemed to be working.

And the “relatives” were asked to respond in kind. A common practice was to give their Uyghur and Kazakh “relatives” gifts to make up for the loss of income they had incurred as a result of the hosting activity and the presence of the police state in general. Some of these gifts of rice and oil were simply ways of supplementing the cost of living for their Muslim “relatives,” but others were symbolic gifts that helped solidify the status of Han visitors as the bearers of a civilizing mission.

For example, according to an online testimonial, one group of civilian state workers gave Uyghur farmers tables and reading lamps so that they could study better late at night.¹⁹ They wrote that the tables would make the farmers more comfortable, but the reality is that many Uyghur farmers prefer not to use tables when they eat or drink tea. There is a long Uyghur tradition of simply using a tablecloth (*dastikhan* داسترخان) on top of a raised platform as the setting for a meal. In their reports, the Han visitors described this tradition as “inconvenient” and a sign of Uyghur poverty.



A Han sent-down worker eats with a Uyghur family at a table he gave them as a gift. This image was posted on social media platform WeChat by the Xinjiang Communist Youth League.

The “relatives” I interviewed often failed to understand the way their hosts viewed their role. Perhaps because they had not observed Uyghur life before their arrival, they did not realize how fear, anger, and sadness had gripped the villagers who they were hoping to teach Han secular values.

In their stories about what they had done, visiting civil servants often did not note that the security institutions that they supported were one of the primary causes of Uyghur poverty.

One Han woman I spoke with who grew up in Urumchi but had not been sent down herself noted that the team she was familiar with was puzzled by the way that Uyghur families simply placed the gifts the “relatives” gave them in the corner of their house. They said that when they came back weeks later, it appeared as though the gifts had not been used. They did not understand why their gifts were rejected.

Two of the workers I interviewed said that they hoped that their interactions with Uyghurs and

Kazakhs would foster genuine friendships. They said they were saddened by the lack of “openness” on the part of their Muslim counterparts.

The daughter of the middle-manager told me that she got the feeling that I and my Uyghur friends might think she was “arrogant and did not care about the lives of the minorities.” She felt misunderstood. She said: “Please do not question my feelings for the Uyghurs or any of the other ethnic groups in China.” She felt that, although the methods that were being used by the “relatives” were not perfect, her intentions, and those of her father, were genuine acts of good faith.

Despite the deep ironies inherent in a series of weeks of forced visits by state workers, most “relatives” I spoke with held out hope that they could make connections with “uncivilized” Uyghur villagers. In fact, being placed in close proximity with others can at times result in particular kinds of friendships that can foster openness to difference.²⁰ It can allow people to share the same perspective. In fact, this is precisely something that the training manuals that the Han “relatives” use warn against in a list of “10 Don’ts”: “Don’t be swayed from your position, harbor sympathies, and wind up brainwashed.”

This type of violent paternalism, a type of state-directed “care,” did not include extending sympathy for missing and detained family members. Instead this form of unwanted care, which for Turkic minorities was impossible to refuse, enacted a process of colonial eradication of unwanted difference. It invaded the most intimate aspects of Uyghur and Kazakh life, fractured relationships between neighbors and inside homes. This violent paternalism, a new totalitarian outgrowth of the patriarchal authoritarianism that typifies the Xi Jinping administration, is at the end of the logic of a modern Chinese state that seeks to assimilate all differences within its

domain.²¹ This logic centers on desires for the land, labor and respect of Uyghurs and Kazakhs. It demands not only the function of minorities as productive elements of a Chinese nation centered around Han cultural values, but also their appreciation of the gift of Chinese citizenship.²² From this perspective 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 for Uyghur and Kazakh Chinese citizens. The Han “relatives” who entered Turkic homes with images of Xi pinned to their lapels were acting on behalf of this logic.

A major driver of violent paternalism is Han nationalism or what is often framed as “national ethnicity” (*zhonghua minzu*). This force pervades all aspects of the Turkic minority indoctrination campaign. As George Orwell wrote in *Notes on Nationalism*, such a spirit is inseparable from a desire for power relative to others; it produces an often unrecognized obsession with disrespect on the part of others.²³ It is a spirit that needs to dominate others; and this domination, like the love of a domineering parent, demands to be loved.²⁴ In such a state Orwell notes, “actions are held to be good or bad, not on their own merits, but according to who does them, and there is almost no kind of outrage — torture, the use of hostages, forced labor, mass deportations, imprisonment without trial, forgery, assassination, the bombing of civilians — which does not change its moral color when it is committed by ‘our’ side.” Under such conditions, outrages such as the forced occupation of the homes of others, the removal of children and the mass detention minorities of military age are viewed as normal and necessary. Many of the Han civilians I interviewed, particularly those who came to the province more recently, saw themselves as building this sort of nationalism. And this self-validating logic allowed them to justify their actions as a long-term benefit to Uyghur and

Kazakh society.

In fact, though, the tyranny that is being realized in Northwest China’s Xinjiang pits groups of Chinese citizens against each other in a totalitarian process that seeks to dominate every aspect of life. The powerful fiction of the “United as One Family program brings Han “relatives” into coercive relations with their Uyghur and Kazakh hosts, producing an epidemic of individualized isolation and loneliness as families, friends, and communities are pulled apart. As new levels of unfreedom are introduced, the project produces new standards of what counts as normal and banal. The “relatives” I spoke to, who did the state’s work of tearing families apart and sending them into the camp system, saw themselves as simply “doing their jobs.”

I believed them. For the most part, they simply did not seem to have thought about the horror they were enacting. No free press was available to them. The majority of the people I interviewed simply did not know or believe that the reeducation camps function as a Chinese-specific form of concentration camps where beatings and psychological torture are common, or that Uyghurs and other minorities viewed their being sent to the camps as a form of punishment.²⁵ Only one of the 10 Han people from Xinjiang I interviewed believed that the camps were functioning as prisons for people who were guilty of simply being in the wrong religious and ethnic categories. It is also important to remember when writing about Han civilian participation in the mass detention of Muslim minorities, as David Brophy and others have noted, that Han civilians who resist state policies toward Uyghurs put themselves in serious danger.²⁶ As one of my Han friends from Xinjiang told me, in this part of the world the phrase “where there is oppression” is met not with the phrase “there will be resistance,” but rather, “there will be submission.” Given the totalitarian politics of the Xinjiang police state, Han civilians in Xinjiang often appear to

feel as though they have no choice but to participate in the state-directed oppression of Muslim minorities.

Citizens of totalitarian states are nearly always compelled to act in ways that deny their ethical obligations. In order for a grass-roots politics of Han civilian refusal of Chinese state oppression of Muslims to even be imaginable, what is taking place in Northwest China needs first to be accurately described. As Hannah Arendt observed decades ago, systems like this one work in part because those who participate in them are not permitted to think about what they are doing.²⁷ Because they are not

permitted to think about it, they are not able to fully imagine what life is like from the position of those whose lives they are destroying.

This is a revised and expanded version of an article that appeared in ChinaFile under the title "[China's Government Has Ordered a Million Citizens to Occupy Uighur Homes. Here's What They Think They're Doing.](#)" The author wishes to thank Susan Jakes for her careful and evocative editing in shaping the voice and content of this article.

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² Ji Yuqiao, "[1.1 million civil servants in Xinjiang pair up with ethnic minority residents to improve unity.](#)" *Global Times*, November 7, 2018.

³ See Tom Cliff. "Lucrative chaos: interethnic conflict as a function of the economic 'normalization' of southern Xinjiang." in *Ethnic conflict and protest in Tibet and Xinjiang*, Ben Hillman and Gray Tuttle, eds. Columbia University Press (2016): 122-150.

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⁵ In order to protect their identities I do not refer to them by name throughout this essay.

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