Negotiating Inseparability in China (Hong Kong University Press 2019)

Negotiating Inseparability in China

A Conversation with Timothy Grose

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Over the past few years Uyghurs in Xinjiang have been the target of unprecedented repression by the Chinese Party-state. However, efforts to assimilate this ethnicity within the Han-dominated 'Chinese Nation' (中华民族) long predate the establishment of reeducation camps in 2017. A good example is the case of the 'Xinjiang Class' (内地新疆高中班), a programme that funds senior high school-aged students from Xinjiang, mostly ethnic Uyghurs, to attend a four-year course in predominately Han-populated cities in eastern and coastal China. In *Negotiating Inseparability in China: The Xinjiang Class and the Dynamics of Uyghur Identity* (Hong Kong University Press 2019), Timothy Grose offers a detailed picture of the multilayered identities of contemporary Uyghur youth and an assessment of the effectiveness of the programme in meeting its political goals.

Ivan Franceschini: Your book examines the experiences of Uyghur graduates of the 'Xinjiang Class' national boarding school programme. Can you tell us more about this programme in the context of the ethnic policies promoted by the Chinese Party-state?

Timothy Grose

Timothy Grose: The Xinjiang Class is a national boarding school programme, established in 2000, that seeks to educate mostly Uyghurs on campuses located across central and eastern China (内地). In terms of academics, the schools and intensive learning environments are meant to prepare ethnic-minority students for the college entrance exam. However, the political goals, which are often emphasised over the mastery of any subject, seek to train a cohort of ethnic minority intellectuals who are sympathetic to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its state-building projects in Xinjiang. Therefore, to a certain extent these programmes resemble boarding schools established in North America and Australia, which attempted (sometimes successfully) to assimilate indigenous peoples.

As I continue to reflect on the Xinjiang Class boarding schools, recently imposed policies in Xinjiang—especially mass internment, 'home visits' (访惠聚), and so-called 'beautification projects' (美丽庭院)—and how they fit within the broader framework of the CCP's ethnic praxes, I am growing more

confident that policies affecting Uyghurs (as well as Kazakhs and Tibetans) are radical and extreme exceptions to the CCP's attempts to manage the country's ethnic and ethno-national diversity. To be sure, 'amalgamation' (融合)—that is, the fusion of all ethnic and ethno-national groups into an all-encompassing nation, but one that retains mostly Han elements—has a long history in China-based politics and continues to undergird the ethnic policies of the CCP. Some of these policies are uniformly carried out across the country.

However, if we compare the frightening realities facing the Uyghurs with those of the Yi, Naxi, and even Dongxiang and Salar minorities, etc., we discover dramatic policy differences. More specifically, ethnic policies implemented outside Xinjiang generally do not intend to severely curtail or eliminate native languages, religious devotions, or indigenous organisation of domestic space. Conversely, policies enforced in the aforementioned areas appear to effectively protect, preserve, and even celebrate meaningful expressions of ethnic minority culture.

Yet, Uyghurs (and Tibetans and Kazakhs) have seemingly been thrust into a different (and unofficial) category of 'ethnic others'. Although these groups are dogmatically included in lists of China's 55 minority *minzu* (ethnic and ethno-national groups), the CCP does not treat them as complacent ethnic minority 'little brothers and sisters', but as untrustworthy, delinquent adolescents who need to be 'scared straight'. Indeed, the CCP is instilling fear—of detention, denial of resources, loss of cultural markers, and so on—into these groups to force a type of performative obedience. But this forced 'social stability' is frail and will likely crack in the future. These groups' recent memories of independence, politically-active diaspora communities, and commitments to non-Chinified (and transnational) faith-based communities make it unlikely that they will ever be completely satisfied in the current configuration vis-à-vis the Party-state, Han majority, and the so-called 'Chinese Nation'. The CCP needs to fundamentally change its course if the Party truly hopes to establish trust with these groups.

IF: Identity politics play a large role in your analysis. Can you tell us more about how the Uyghur youths whom you interviewed perceive their position in relation to the 'Chinese Nation'? Can your interviewees be considered a representative sample of the new generation of Uyghurs?

TG: In the book, I consciously avoid generalising the experiences of Uyghur Xinjiang Class graduates, and I hesitate to suggest they are somehow representative of young Uyghurs

in the twenty-first century. To be sure, the Xinjiang Class introduced a curriculum—Chinese-only instruction, emphasis on ‘correct’ political ideology, and near zero-tolerance of religious practice—that is beginning to dominate state schooling in Xinjiang. But perhaps observable similarities end there.

Scholarship tends to agree that the social process of identifying with human collectivities is shaped by very specific, often ephemeral experiences and historical contexts. In other words, although my interlocutors are bilingual (Uyghur and Chinese) Uyghurs—as many young, educated Uyghurs are—the sociopolitical backdrop against which they lived in boarding schools in eastern China before the Ürümchi protest of 2009 and the mass internment of 2016 cannot ever be replicated. Therefore, their understandings of Uyghurness, Chineseness, etc., were informed by these specific historical and political currents. Although this conclusion may be frustrating, we should be reminded that ethnic identity is simultaneously so interesting for scholars and potentially threatening to the modern nation-state precisely because it cannot be created and controlled in a laboratory-type setting.

Speaking only about the individuals included in my study, though, I noticed a partial embrace of their state-ascribed identity as part of the ‘Chinese Nation’. To be sure, I had to put faith in my analysis to arrive at this conclusion because they never invoked the concept during our interactions. In fact, during my years of field research, I was extremely careful not to reify officially-defined groups. Therefore, I never asked my friends and informants for their thoughts on the ‘Chinese Nation’. Still, my interlocutors, many of whom I gained trust with over several years, never spoke about a longing for an independent East Turkestan nor did they refuse to speak Chinese; some even enjoyed celebrating holidays like the Spring Festival. I interpreted these behaviours as selective participation in the ‘Chinese Nation’.

However, they also insinuated that the CCP included them in the ‘Chinese Nation’ as a perfunctory gesture. Although these individuals were academically successful and thrived in a Chinese education system, they insisted their skills and abilities would not be fully utilised in Xinjiang or China for that matter. Many complained bitterly about the few job prospects available to them in their homeland, many of which—they insisted—would be subordinate to Han employers and managers. In the vast majority of cases, their predictions proved to be accurate.

IF: The Chinese Party-state justifies the existence of the reeducation camps in Xinjiang as a way to eradicate religious extremism among the Uyghur population. What role did religion play in the identity of your interviewees? How did they feel about such rhetoric?

TG: Many of the graduates I befriended and interviewed identified Islam as an important reference point in their constellation of Uyghurness. Yet, the book demonstrates how varied pious behaviour is among Xinjiang Class graduates. Certainly, many of them became interested in Islam as university students in other parts of China because they met non-Xinjiang Class Uyghurs, Muslims from other countries, and accessed Islamic knowledge (mosques, books, websites, etc.) unavailable in Xinjiang. To sate their religious curiosities, some of my interlocutors began observing at least some of the five obligatory prayers (*namaz/salat*), reading the Qur'an, fasting during Ramadan, or adopting pious dress.

With that said, it is difficult to predict whether this newfound religiosity will remain an important part of these individuals' ethno-national (and personal) identities throughout their lives. Similar to ethnic identity itself, religious convictions can unpredictably strengthen and weaken over a lifetime. Before the current crisis, I was planning to conduct follow-up interviews with a group of 15 key individuals both inside and outside the PRC 10, 20, and 30 years after finishing their boarding school education. Tragically, this research is far too dangerous at present.

IF: How have your interviewees been affected by the new repressive measures implemented by the Chinese leadership since 2017?

TG: I think every Uyghur has been affected in some way, many directly, by these repressive measures. During my last visit to Xinjiang in the summer of 2017, I was told that one of my friends (a graduate of the programme who was pursuing a graduate degree in Turkey) had been detained when he returned home for a wedding. Several graduates who found work in Ürümqi were sent back to their hometowns (i.e., the locale tied to their household registration). Unfortunately but understandably, I have lost contact with my Uyghur contacts who remained in China and have not received information about their well-being. The fact that my Xinjiang Class contacts have also been affected by these policies exposes a startling truth: the CCP even distrusts those Uyghurs who voluntarily participated—and succeeded—in the Party's carefully-conceived education initiative. ■

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