8

Triple dispossession in northwestern China

Sam Tynen

In Xinjiang today, most Uyghurs remain outside the detention camps but still live in a type of open-air prison. Their phones are monitored and censored. Their passports are confiscated. Their movements are tracked, and bodies checked and scanned constantly. The Chinese state security agenda has targeted Uyghurs since Islamophobia really took hold in the country after 11 September 2001 (Hessler 2006; Roberts 2020).

In this essay, I demonstrate what oppression and marginalisation mean outside the camps in broader Uyghur society. I argue that there are many kinds of state violence that are invisible and insidious. The visible types of state violence that will be explored are housing demolition, eviction from homes, and incarceration or detainment. These aspects are all very much present in media and government reports about the Xinjiang region. However, this recent focus on the strikingly visible aspects of Chinese state power in the region overlooks acts of everyday and invisible violence that are part and parcel of the region's current political economy of development. My goal is to shed light on the inherent violence of the nation-state, especially for targeted minorities and the undocumented.

Building on Das (2007), I use ethnographic fieldwork to study 'ordinary' state violence. What do I mean by 'everyday', 'ordinary', and 'invisible' state violence? I refer to those mundane events that occur so frequently that one does not think about them—for example: ID cards being stamped with a fixed ethnic identity; being called a 'minority'; housing registration forms only being available in Chinese, with no translation; Chinese as the dominant language of television and government; movement controlled by police and bureaucratic red tape; being compelled to move to the city for work; and needing a passport for mobility. Indeed, refugees and the undocumented will be the first to tell you how passports are a type of ordinary state violence, preventing free passage and granting rights and access only to certain people.

ID cards, language, and minority categories might not look like violence because nobody is forcing anyone to do anything and no-one is being physically harmed. However, on further investigation, one can see that conditions that remove agency from the subject are a type of violent control. These aspects of state monitoring are not based on choice but are compulsory; having an ID card that labels the person a certain race and gender is not optional. Invisible state violence is often the precondition for more obvious forms of explicit violence. In the Uyghur case, managing and monitoring ID cards and residency permit applications for Uyghurs later allowed the state to efficiently locate and displace hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs from various parts of China, ultimately channelling them into internment camps.

While the media and some foreign governments focus on internment camps for Uyghurs in China, questions remain about the invisible violence of the state: How do dispossession and displacement occur for rural migrant Uyghurs in Xinjiang on an individual scale? What is the role of their dispossession in securing state territorial control? To explore these questions, I focus on 22 Uyghurs and their rural-to-urban migration experiences. Their stories illustrate their dispossession even before the internment camps became widespread. According to my interviews, the three stages of dispossession are displacement from the countryside, alienation in the city, and ultimately eviction from the city. This triple dispossession helped create the conditions for the mass internment.

This essay draws on ethnographic participant-observation over the course of living in Ürümqi, in Xinjiang, for 24 months from 2014 to 2017.¹ All names used are pseudonyms. Note that to protect the identity of my informants, I do not include specific demographic information when quoting from conversations. The figures in this chapter are composites of several female rural migrant informants and provide a thick description of Uyghur migrant women's experiences in Ürümqi. The remaining quotes are a sample collection from all 22 Uyghur rural migrants whom I interviewed in 2016–17, most of them women. I also spoke to an additional 26 Uyghurs who grew up in cities, who informed my analysis but are not quoted here. In addition, I had informal conversations with 52

1 For more information on state surveillance, knowledge production, and methods during that time, see Ryan and Tynen (2019).

Uyghurs from urban and rural areas who gave informed consent to quote them. Some of those 52 conversations from rural migrants informed the figures and are quoted here.

Defining displacement and dispossession

Uyghurs live in a settler-colonial context (Byler 2018; Roberts 2020). Colonisation is about extracting resources from a place for profit. Settler colonialism takes it to the next level by bringing people from the colonising place into the colonised one to live there permanently. The United States, Canada, and Australia are examples of colonies where large numbers of settlers came to the new land, decimated the native populations, and became the dominant society (Coulthard 2014).

State-subsidised Han Chinese migration to the Xinjiang region, especially since the 1940s, represents a clear pattern of settler colonialism in the Uyghur homeland (see also Cliff's Chapter 6 in this volume). According to official data, the Han Chinese population grew from 200,000 residents in 1944 to 9.5 million in 2015 (Xinjiang Statistics Bureau 2016). The Chinese Communist Party continues to use Han migration as a tool of state control in the region (Cliff 2009, 2016). Estimates from the *Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook* of 2019 say there are close to 12 million Han migrants in Xinjiang today, although the accuracy of these numbers is questionable.

In addition to migration, there is a long history of Han appropriating land, oil, natural gas, jade, and other resources from Xinjiang that goes back to the early eighteenth century but took off from the 1880s (Perdue 2005). Uyghurs have long experienced colonisation via 'development', through which the Chinese state claims to provide economic 'assistance'. The boom in private industry in the 1990s and 2000s also removed Uyghur ownership of land and capital (Byler 2018). As one example, Dautcher (2009: 57) records that there were 'discriminatory zoning regulations and the coerced sale of Uyghur-owned land to Han in-migrants' in Xinjiang during the 1990s. Settler colonialism systematically removed the Uyghur relationship to land, livelihood, and knowledge (Schluessel 2016).

Dispossession is the opposite of possession (Moreton-Robinson 2015), and dispossession is a primary theme in the colonisation of Xinjiang. If possessing property and resources is the advantage of the coloniser, the colonised experience the inverse. Dispossession can be accomplished through various means—for example, the changing of placenames or redrawing of maps to ignore native land possession. Other examples

include the destruction of knowledge systems, ways of life, or modes of thinking—for instance, in North America, the native idea that ‘land cannot be owned’ was transformed under colonisation into ‘you must have a title to use this land’. The concept of ‘dispossession’ used in this essay aids in investigating the inequality and social relations that underlie the process of Uyghurs claiming a homeland.

Epistemic dispossession is at the heart of the settler-colonial process. In colonial contexts, epistemic dispossession destroys a way of thinking and being without offering a replacement or substituting with an unwanted replacement. Coulthard (2014) argues that dispossession is not as simple as land seizure and compensation in a context where that concept of ownership never existed. Rather, dispossession is the introduction of a new episteme that brings forward a different relationship to property. New ways of thinking, knowing, and being deprive natives of prior forms of sociality. The present-day dispossession of Uyghurs—through the introduction of Chinese ways of thinking and being, a novel sociality, as well as new private property relations—occurred during their movements between rural and urban areas. A triple dispossession has occurred since 2014 as Uyghurs left the countryside, found alienation and unemployment once they reached the city, and were later forced from the cities and into internment camps (see also Tynen 2019, 2020).

Stories of epistemic dispossession highlight the invisible forms of violence inflicted by state-led development, as well as palpable incidents of state terror. Uyghur life stories highlight the marginalisation of bodies left behind by development and disappeared by the state. Uyghur narratives of desire and fear demonstrate the way the vectors of dispossession move between the epistemic and the material. In addition to loss of land and livelihood, they experience loss of personal autonomy and sovereignty over their own bodies, homes, and families. Control over the domestic sphere and bodies is a key goal of state territorial control. As such, territorial control comes to encompass not simply land, but also the economic, political, and cultural networks that shape a certain place.

Part I: Displacement from the countryside

The people I interviewed claim agency in their decision to move to the city, but their narratives reveal a fine line between consent and coercion. The invisible violence associated with economic development played a major role in dispossession and displacement. All the rural migrants

came to the city for work or to accompany family members who had migrated to look for work or to study. However, they also repeatedly claimed that ‘economic development’ had caused negative effects in their rural hometowns, as ‘the [rural] economy has got worse’ (*iqtisad tovenlep ketti*). It is important to note that this recurrent theme in the interviews reflected a measure of how Xinjiang’s economy was doing for categories of the population—indeed, according to the numbers, Xinjiang’s economy has only improved in the past 10 years. However, for Uyghur people in rural areas, economic opportunities have decreased while the cost of living has increased. Their stories are evidence of the way inequality is being exacerbated by economic development. For these interviewees, dispossession in their rural hometowns occurred because of development projects that were supposed to increase the standard of living, but instead made homes and other goods unaffordable.

In addition, interviewees reported experiencing surveillance in rural areas that pushed them to find political and cultural freedom in the cities. Some spoke about the relatively intense surveillance in their hometowns that went beyond restrictions on religious practice alone: ‘The local politics has made [my hometown] a difficult place to live. It’s not free like Ürümqi is.’ ‘There are police and roadside checkpoints everywhere, people are afraid to leave their homes for fear of getting arrested for no reason.’ ‘We came with high hopes for a new life. Everybody in [my hometown] wants to leave and come to Ürümqi, and our relatives told us not to come home and to stay in Ürümqi for now, at least until the situation [*veziyet*] gets better.’ *Veziyet* was often used as a seemingly neutral euphemism to refer to the government or to mean ‘political situation.’ ‘Everybody in [my hometown] wants to leave and come to Ürümqi because it’s a lot freer here.’

This tightening of surveillance and control in rural areas ultimately enabled forms of dispossession that exceeded simple land seizure. This dispossession included restrictions on a people’s identity and way of life. By eliminating daily practices—such as mosque attendance, ritual performance, language education, and travel to regional markets—the state undermined the cohesiveness of Uyghur society and thus established stronger territorial control. All this was part of an Islamophobic policy targeting Uyghur bodies. These projects, in conjunction with state and community surveillance, drove Uyghurs to the city. The economic dispossession by the state and market combined with ethnic discrimination and dispossession of homeland in a colonial project to control and eliminate

Plate 8.1 A typical Uyghur living room, with carpet, decorated mat, and a tablecloth for eating, while a child sleeps in the corner. Photo by the author.

Uyghur culture and society. It is against this backdrop that the next two phases of dispossession—that is, alienation in and eviction from the city—have taken place.

Part 2: Alienation in the city

Aygul quickly swept the carpet with a hand broom, pulled out the guest mat with gold trim, folded it over double for me, and urged me to sit.

Flustered, she apologised profusely for not having any tea on hand: ‘We just don’t have the conditions for luxuries like tea right now.’ She then brought in *naan* bread, hot water, and tiny clementine oranges from her shop for us to share.

I asked Aygul about her life in the city. She had moved to Ürümqi 13 years earlier from a rural village in Xinjiang. ‘When I first moved here, for me, Ürümqi was awesome [*peyzi*]. There was every kind of person and every kind of opportunity, and a lot more freedom,’ she told me.

Aygul had a round face and was almost always smiling, despite the fact one of her favourite activities was complaining. She vented to me about her poor housing conditions—they did not have a toilet or proper heating—her husband and kids, and the Chinese Government. Aygul

spoke fast—so fast that sometimes I could not catch all the words as they jumbled together and on top of one another. But even when she was angry or upset, she usually still managed to slip in jokes, even if they were at the expense of her husband.

‘I’m so tired and worn out. I’m a mother of two young kids, so there’s no such thing as rest for me,’ she said, sighing.

Her jolly chortles made her large belly shake and her chubby cheeks stick out. When she was tired—as she so often was—she put her head in her hands and her eyelids drooped, and she talked a little slower, telling me about the pressures of trying to run the shop and raise two young children without the resources, such as a washing machine, that she desired and envied others for having.

The story of Aygul illustrates some common sentiments expressed during my 22 interviews with rural migrants. All my interviewees came to the city for work or accompanied their husbands or parents who had come to the city looking for employment or to study. Economic dispossession played a major role in their displacement from rural to urban areas in Xinjiang because there was no work in the countryside.

People felt compelled to move to the city to find a job or to pursue an education. For rural migrants, a phrase that came up at least once in all my interviews was *‘amal yoq’*, which literally means ‘there is no way/method’, and is used in Uyghur to mean ‘there is nothing to be done’ or ‘I have no other options’. The Chinese equivalent of this phrase is *‘mei banfa’* (没办法). Often their stories of moving to the city were couched in the terms of *amal yoq*, and the lack of alternatives spoke to the depth of economic dispossession that many experienced in their hometowns, which eventually drove them to the city and kept them there.

While some Uyghurs talked of the freedom of the city, they also spoke of a further dispossession after relocation from the jobless countryside. They struggled with loneliness in a new culture in the city. They often complained about the pollution and felt stress and alienation from their community due to wage labour. These feelings of being trapped in hourly wage jobs were couched in terms of the pervasive selfishness imbued in urban social relations. They also talked about a loss of community practices, such as hosting visitors or being a guest in the home of others (*mehman bolush/qilish*). One woman told me: ‘We hate the city, but we have no choice but to move here for the jobs and for political and cultural freedoms.’ While most interviewees in 2016—before the camps opened—said they disliked the city, about half said they did not plan to return to

their hometowns for the reasons cited above: lack of jobs and freedom. As such, their narratives of urban existence were shrouded in hopelessness and depression.

That rural migrants who came to the city seeking a better life were met with alienation and dispossession reveals the political and economic implications of dispossession from urbanisation and development projects. Their insistence that they had no choice but to stay and could not return to their hometown in the countryside for economic and political reasons foreshadowed the demolitions, evictions, and incarcerations that began in 2017.

Part 3: Eviction from the city

Aygul was sitting on the carpet in the front room playing on her phone. When I approached, she stood up to greet me with two kisses, one on each cheek, and her eyelids were drooping with sleep.

‘How are things?’ I inquired.

‘Well ... They are kicking everyone [the Uyghurs] out of Ürümqi. I can’t go back to rural Kashgar ... The politics, the economic situation—it’s so much worse than here. So, I don’t know what’s going to happen,’ she said with a wavering voice, tears pooling in her eyes.

‘We just got word today that all the shops on this street will be demolished in three days. So, our shop will be gone soon. There’s nothing we can do about it.’

‘Where are you moving to?’ I asked.

‘There is no place to move to!’ she said, as though she was talking to an incompetent child. ‘But now they are evicting *all* migrant Uyghurs from the city. They [government agents] are all so evil, they are breaking up families and they don’t even care.’

I told Aygul I was sad to hear this, but my words sounded flat as my heart sat in my throat. She said to me:

All of us here have broken hearts, eh? We can’t do anything here; they won’t rent to us [Uyghur people], they won’t let us buy a house, they won’t let us live here or work here, nothing. They just want to send us away. So, they’re evil. There’s nothing to be done.

(Left) Plate 8.2 Notification of demolition by the local government. Both strips of paper say the same thing: 'Victory Road Management Committee, Nanliang Neighbourhood Committee Letter'. Photo by the author; May 2017. (Right) Plate 8.3 The 'chai' symbol of demolition marks a Uyghur restaurant in Ürümqi. Photo by author; May 2017.

All the shops on the street were shuttered, locked and marked with big white Xs to prevent anyone getting back in. I saw through the window of Aygul's shop that there were some abandoned blankets inside. The white Xs bore the name of the neighbourhood community centre office.

I noticed a white X taped firmly across the front doors of the neighbouring noodle restaurant. I walked up to the window and looked inside. The display case for cakes was still illuminated and half a watermelon was sitting inside. Tables and chairs were stacked on top of each other, there was a metal basin filled with white porcelain cups, and a container of spicy chilli peppers and a basin of vinegar on the table closest to the window. It was as though the occupants had not been informed of the demolition with enough time to clean out the shop.

A street that was once bustling with activity now sat silent.

By the end of the first week of May, the entire neighbourhood had been demolished.

In mid-May 2017, I met up with Aygul, who was still in Ürümqi. 'I tried delaying going back to Kashgar as long as I could. But the situation is just out of control,' she explained, shaking her head. 'They are cracking down like never before. I have to leave. I have to go back to Kashgar now or else I'll be arrested. They might arrest me or send me to a "re-education" training school.' She shook her head and raised her eyebrows while pursing her lips.

That was the last time I saw or heard from her.

This story illustrates the way poor, rural migrants were evicted from the city through a slow escalation and tightening of rules. The evictions were carried out as targeted neighbourhood policing that profiled rural Uyghurs and used demolition for the purpose of redevelopment as a pretext to economically and politically force Uyghurs from the city and into internment camps.

Implications of Uyghur migrant dispossession

In some ways, the process of Uyghur migrant eviction is similar to the experiences of Han migrant workers in other urban areas of China (Zhang 2001). Some scholars have argued that, historically, migrant workers have been treated as ‘minorities’ and ‘outsiders’ even if they have ‘Han’ on their ID card (Honig 1992). Some contemporary scholars compare the *hukou* regime to a form of apartheid (Alexander and Chan 2006). Others speak of discrimination as a kind of classism in terms of the ‘quality’ of migrants (Pun 2005; Yan 2008). Meanwhile, other scholars talk about migrants from certain provinces being ‘racialised’ (Han 2009). Thus, important similarities exist between Han migrants and Uyghur migrants, particularly regarding the economic forces that push migrant workers to be less attached to their land and livelihood (Tynen 2019).

However, the situation in Xinjiang is also distinct. Han migrants are generally able to move to other parts of the city or to other cities, while Uyghurs are criminalised wherever they go due to an Islamophobic discourse of terrorism and violence that follows them everywhere (see Brophy’s Chapter 4 in this volume). Once evicted, Uyghurs in Ürümqi and all over China were forced to return to their rural hometowns. Furthermore, the Uyghur case is different in its context of a colonial power seizing indigenous land and claiming sovereignty. Especially for the Uyghurs, the ethnic differences between themselves and their colonisers define an inequality that is irreversible and unforgivable. The gap between cultures, religions, and languages leaves a gulf so wide it cannot be mended. This is the difference between urban cleansing in the Han case and racial banishment in the Uyghur case (Roy 2019).

The camps in 2017

Aygul's experience was a common one during the spring of 2017. At that time, no-one knew what was going on. The rules kept changing. It was confusing and scary. We did not realise it then, but the purpose of demolishing Uyghur homes and shops, and eventually evicting Uyghur migrants from the city, was to force them back to the countryside, where they would be met with internment, held without trial or criminal conviction, never to return.

After Aygul, many of my friends started disappearing. The confusion and fear were palpable in the whispers and looks exchanged and in the shake of a head. Words did not need to be exchanged to know that a relative or friend had been interned for 'reeducation'.

According to a state report published in 2013, Xinjiang authorities believed ethnic-minority migrants in the region needed to be targeted and 'transformed' (转变) through a range of legal education and training measures (Wu 2020). In line with the hierarchical policy implementation that is common in China, it appears that, over time, each county was made responsible for carrying out this project and given quotas and targets. To meet these, they had to call people back from the city—a process that had begun in 2014 with a passbook system (The Economist 2016). Underlying this system was a discourse of danger. The Uyghur migrants were seen as a threat to the safety and security of the city and Han populations, and therefore had to be detained and re-educated because of their extremist beliefs. The camps were part of this re-education effort. They were built primarily in rural Xinjiang. Many rural Uyghurs who were sent back to the place of their original household registration were placed in camps in that location. According to interviews with a former camp worker in the city (Byler 2021), urban Uyghurs were also detained in city camps. The entire process of asserting social control was originally underpinned by rather banal ID cards and registration forms.

Warning signs

The life experiences of Uyghur rural migrants in the city show how economics and security work to exploit and displace minority bodies. First, they were displaced from their homes in the countryside due to poor economic development policies. Second, they struggled in the city, and were often left unemployed and alienated. Third, they were evicted from

the city because of the Islamophobic discourse of Uyghurs as extremists and terrorists. They were seen as a danger to safety and security, and were evicted, arrested, and detained on a scale that far outweighs that of any other ethnic group in China. These stories offer us warning signs for other parts of the world that might be heading towards state violence. The pattern is economic crisis combined with an oppressive political environment. The evictions were not simply displacement for the sake of demolition and redevelopment of the cities. The evictions were about forcing Uyghurs to leave the city for 'safety' reasons, which justified their incarceration in internment camps. The triple dispossession created the conditions for the mass internment: large numbers of unemployed Uyghurs, dissatisfaction with their lives in the cities, and eviction based on narratives of Islamophobia.

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