

Negotiating Inseparability in China

The Xinjiang Class and the Dynamics of Uyghur Identity

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Introduction

We must make fighting separatism our top priority in a bid to safeguard Xinjiang's social stability and closely guard against and severely crack down on the 'three evil forces.'

—Nur Bekri, Former Chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region
People's Daily, March 6, 2011

Although still boasting the name of an impressive landmark, the International Grand Bazaar in Ürümchi, Xinjiang,¹ appeared dilapidated in July 2017. Just a decade before, the open-air market bustled with excitement. Speakers blasted the latest synthesizer-heavy Central Asian melodies at deafening volumes; food hawkers, veiled by thick clouds of black smoke emanating from charcoal grills, filled the air with the aromas of roasted mutton generously spiced with cumin; and death-defying tightrope performances attracted throngs of people in the evenings.

Clearly, much had changed. The few visitors seeking entry to the gated marketplace solemnly queued for security checks. As tourists and shoppers approached the metal detector, they robotically opened their purses and bags while security attendants inspected the contents, paying careful attention to Uyghur visitors. Inside the market, vendors were confined to the trellised National (*Minzu*)² Unity Pedestrian Street (*Uy. milletler ittifaqlıdiki ülgilik kocha*;³ *Ch. minzu tuanjie boxing jie*) and

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1. Comprising one-sixth of China's total territory, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is the largest provincial-level political unit in the country. Neighboring Mongolia to the south, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to the east, and Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to the northeast, Xinjiang shares more international borders than any other Chinese province. Domestically, the XUAR borders the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), Qinghai, and Gansu.
 2. *Minzu* is the Chinese term used to describe the People's Republic of China's (PRC) fifty-six ethnic (and ethno-national) groups. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) identified *minzu* groups using a loose interpretation of Joseph Stalin's four criteria for nationality: i.e., common language, territory, economy, and culture (Fei 1980). Recent research has exposed the many imperfections of the CCP's ethnic identification campaign (*Ch. minzu shibie*) (Mullaney 2011). In light of the term's inadequacies, I will not attempt to translate it into English. For more on the ambiguity of many ethnic designations in China, see Gladney 1991; Harrell 2001.
 3. With the exception of commonly known Uyghur place-names such as Kashgar and Khotan, I use the Uyghur Latin alphabet (*Uyghur Latin Yéziqi*, or ULY) for the romanization of all other Uyghur terms. I have chosen the ULY for the sake of consistency and understand that Uyghurs often borrow from many "standardized" systems in their daily communication.



Figure 0.1: The International Grand Bazaar, Ürümchi, Xinjiang: “Minzu Unity, One Family”

appeared to be concerned more with sheltering themselves from the oppressive heat than selling their handicrafts and dried fruits. A large piece of engraved slate depicting “Uncle” Qurban Tulum, a poor Uyghur farmer from Khotan who supposedly rode his donkey from Xinjiang to Beijing,⁴ embracing hands with Mao Zedong leaned against the rear exterior wall of the Döngköwürük Mosque. The caption below the simple engraving reads in Uyghur, Chinese, and English, “Uncl [sic] Qurban Visits Beijing.” The square’s focal point—and one of its few remaining “tourist attractions”—is a large statue of a pomegranate scored through the core exposing its arils. Large red Chinese characters erected in front of the faux fruit read, “Minzu Unity: One Family” (Ch. *minzu tuanjie yi jia qin*).

The pomegranate has become the defining image of *minzu* cohesion since General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping’s May 2014 address to the Central Work Forum on Xinjiang. In his speech, Xi encouraged China’s *minzu* groups to nestle tightly as if they were pomegranate seeds (*China Education Newspaper* 2014). The calyx-crowned fruit is now prominently featured in full-color posters hung throughout Xinjiang, in television commercials broadcast in every major oasis city, and in newspaper advertisements reaching every corner of the region. Despite the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) efforts to promote this

4. According to the popular story, Qurban Tulum rode his donkey from Xinjiang to Beijing to meet Mao Zedong. In reality, Qurban traveled to Beijing as part of a special delegation organized by the CCP to celebrate land reform.

slogan, the pomegranate metaphor for minzu unity is only convincing if the fruit remains enclosed in its leathery outer skin. When opened, a pomegranate's red arils can be easily plucked from its membranes. Once the seeds are exposed, they will loosen and fall to the ground with a delicate tap and gentle squeeze.

The seeds of minzu unity in Xinjiang began to dislodge in bunches on July 5, 2009. While the CCP might have wished for that Sunday to resemble any other hot but placid summer day in Ürümchi, the morning instead brought public protest followed by deadly violence that afternoon. Uyghur university and high school students took to the streets demanding government action after the deaths of two fellow Uyghurs came at the hands of their Han coworkers from a toy factory in Shaoguan, Guangdong Province. In a public display of anger over the CCP's (mis)handling of the Shaoguan incident, hundreds of Uyghurs carrying Chinese flags staged mass demonstrations in the autonomous region's capital.⁵ Tempers quickly swelled, and the protest spiraled into interethnic violence, with Uyghur protesters attacking Han bystanders and vandalizing Han-owned properties. On July 7 Han citizens wielding improvised weapons poured into the city's predominantly Uyghur districts seeking revenge. According to some estimates, the riots and ensuing violence claimed 197 lives and resulted in close to 2,000 injuries before order was restored (*Reuters* 2009; Ramzy 2010); the Munich-based World Uyghur Congress reported over 600 deaths (*BBC* 2009).⁶ In a stroke of poetic irony, Liberation Road (Ch. *Jiefang lu*) and Unity Road (Ch. *Tuanjie lu*) were the epicenters of violence. The names of these heavily trafficked arterial roads provided unobvious reminders of the "New Era" ushered in by the CCP. The riots demonstrated that many Uyghurs have yet to buy into this interpretation of history.

Nevertheless, China's state-controlled media quickly spun the story to deflect blame from CCP policy. Official reports alleged that the high-profile dissident and then president of the World Uyghur Congress Rabiye Qadir carefully orchestrated the attacks from abroad (*Xinhua* 2009). This is a story often recycled but rarely confirmed by independent media: malicious groups from outside have infiltrated Xinjiang and radicalized a very small segment of Uyghur society to commit heinous acts of violence (or, in the eyes of the CCP, "terrorism").

More troubling for the CCP, violence did not end that July afternoon on the streets of Ürümchi. The region has witnessed an uptick in sporadic attacks since 2010, and insurrection has spilled into other regions. However, a string of unrelated yet large-scale coordinated attacks began in 2013. On June 6, 2013, a group of Uyghur men armed with knives in Lukchun, a sleepy town near Turpan, laid siege to a police station, leaving thirty-five people dead (Powers 2013). Five people died and forty others were injured on October 28, 2013, when a Uyghur driving an SUV plowed into a crowd of people at Beijing's iconic Tiananmen Square (Demick 2014). On March 1, 2014, Uyghur assailants carried out a knife attack at a busy train

5. Darren Byler shared with me these important details of the Uyghur protests.

6. For academic treatments of the 2009 Ürümchi riots, see Millward 2009; Smith Finley 2011; Tobin 2011.

station in Kunming, Yunnan, which claimed twenty-nine lives and injured scores more (Powers 2014a). A September 18, 2015 ambush at a coal mine in Aksu resulted in over fifty deaths. Meanwhile, skirmishes between Uyghurs and security personnel have become common occurrences (Lee 2014; Radio Free Asia n.d.). Discontent simmers and paroxysms of violence have unsettled the region, straining an already fragile relationship between Uyghurs and the party-state.

Protracted conflict in the region brings into focus fundamental issues pertinent to the future stability of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Despite Beijing's claim that Xinjiang has been an "inalienable" part of China since "ancient times" and the Uyghurs are "inseparable" members of the country's multiethnic mosaic of peoples,⁷ many Uyghurs insist their language, religion, and culture are under systematic assault, while others complain about being left out of China's booming (but Han-dominated) economy (Cliff 2016). Indeed, many Uyghurs claim to be suffering under the current order and desire meaningful reform. In a playful expression of their indignation, several of my Uyghur friends purposely substituted a near homophone for the official term "liberation," *azadliq* in the Uyghur vernacular and a reference to the founding of the People's Republic of China. Instead, they used the term *azabliq*, which means "suffering."

Has the CCP made a gross miscalculation in its "civilizing project" (Harrell 1995), which is ostensibly aimed at amalgamating (Ch. *ronghe*) China's ethnically diverse population (Mackerras 1994)? Is the CCP failing to "interpellate" or hail (Althusser 1971) the Uyghurs through state apparatuses as complaisant members of the "Chinese Nation" (referred to hereafter as the "Zhonghua minzu")?⁸ How do young Uyghurs conceive, demarcate, and express their collective identities, understood here as the dynamic formation of common interpersonal relationships that define in-group and out-group membership based on shared language and culture (Melucci 1995, 45–49)? Is it possible for Uyghurs to be "separate but loyal" to the Zhonghua minzu (Tang and He 2010), or are Uyghur and Chinese identities mutually exclusive?

This study engages with these questions by critically examining and theorizing the experiences of Uyghur graduates of the "Xinjiang Class" national boarding school program (Ch. *neidi Xinjiang gaozhong ban*; Uy. *ichkiri ölkilerdiki Shinjang*

7. A popular Chinese dictum goes, "Han are inseparable from minority minzu, minority minzu are inseparable from the Han, and each minority minzu is inseparable from one another" (Ch. *Hanzu libukai shaoshuminzu, shaoshuminzu libukai Hanzu, gemin shaoshuminzu zhijian huxiang libukai*). See, for example, Communist Youth League Central Committee 2009, 30.

8. As a political concept, Zhonghua minzu has a rich history. James Leibold (2006, 212–13n1) traced the first usage of the term to the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) reformer Liang Qichao, who in 1903 used the term in an attempt to formulate a multiethnic Chinese nationalism, as opposed to more narrow and Han-centric conceptualizations of Chinese nationalism advocated by anti-Manchu Han intellectuals. See also Leibold 2007. In its contemporary usage, the term captures the complex relationships between the Han majority, the fifty-five minority minzu (Ch. *shaoshu minzu*), and the Chinese party-state. The Chinese party-state acknowledges the diversity of its population yet insists on its unity, a concept China's most influential anthropologist, Fei Xiaotong (2010), termed the "pluralistic unity" (Ch. *duoyuan yiti*) of the Zhonghua minzu.

toluq ottura sinipliri).⁹ The Xinjiang Class was established in the year 2000 to educate mainly ethnic Uyghur students at schools located in central and eastern China. Of course, as students in “inner China” (*neidi*),¹⁰ the young Uyghurs did not participate in the violence that has plagued Xinjiang; in fact, they condemned it. Yet they challenged the absoluteness of CCP rule and their assigned status as minority *minzu* in subtle ways: they defined, embraced, and asserted markers of Uyghur and Muslim identities unsanctioned by the state. To be sure, performing Uyghur identity does not require an outright rejection of Chineseness through violent protests or calls for independence. Rather, Xinjiang Class graduates decide as individuals how to navigate their multilayered identities.

What unfolds is a dynamic and sometimes contradictory process. Xinjiang Class graduates employed their boarding school educations to resist and break free from the party-state’s narrowly defined *minzu* category—the *Weiwu’er zu* (维吾尔族)¹¹—and the racialized, yet inclusive *Zhonghua minzu*. They were instead drawn to collectivities wherein membership is more flexible. Indeed, many Xinjiang Class graduates simultaneously desired to be Uyghur, Muslim, educated, modern, and even Chinese. As such, a central argument of this study is that Xinjiang Class graduates participated in Chinese mainstream society and appropriated ethnic markers of the dominant Han people to stretch the boundaries of their ethno-national identities. More specifically, Xinjiang Class graduates used their privileged experiences in Han-dominated *neidi* cities to strengthen transregional bonds with other Uyghurs, connect with non-Chinese Muslims, and chart paths to other countries. These opportunities—which can be more difficult to create in Xinjiang owing to an increasingly invasive surveillance apparatus and oppressive policies (Klimeš 2018; Rajagopalan 2017; Zenz and Leibold 2017)—activated and solidified transregional and transnational identities, which oftentimes were linked to the *umma*, or the global community of Muslims.

9. The *neidi Xinjiang gaozhong ban* also has been translated variously into English as “Inland Xinjiang Senior Secondary School Classes” (Chen 2008; Chen and Postiglione 2009) and abbreviated as “Xinjiang Classes” (Chen 2008; Chen and Postiglione 2009). I have chosen to play with the absence of plural suffixes in modern Chinese and have taken the liberty of translating this program as the “Xinjiang Class” despite the Uyghur language use of *sinipliri*, or “classes.” I have chosen to leave “class” in its singular form to show that, although there are multiple schools hosting Uyghur senior high students across China, these schools are part of one overarching program that is managed with a considerable degree of uniformity.

10. I use the term *neidi* throughout this book because my informants distinguished the Han-majority provinces as such. Their use of this term vis-à-vis Xinjiang (as well as the Tibet Autonomous Region) implies that inner China is defined by cultural, linguistic, and religious practices that differ greatly from those predominating in Uyghur-majority communities in Xinjiang.

11. Throughout this book, I use *Weiwu’er*—the Chinese rendering of *Uyghur*—to refer to the state-defined identity offered to Uyghurs.

Ethnicity and the State

Scholars have gone to great lengths to produce a taxonomy for malleable and ambiguous social units such as “nation,” “ethnic group,” and “ethnic minority” (Atkin 1992; Bromley and Koslov 1989; Chebokarov 1970; Connor 2004; Gellner 1983; Harrell 2001; Hobsbawm 1990; Shanin 1989, 409–13; Smith 1998). Space prevents recapitulating every influential argument on these topics here, but it is worth noting the several important works informing the current study. Ethnic groups are but one of many “reference groups” available to individuals (Ardener 1972). Members of an ethnic group constellate, delimit social boundaries, and crystallize feelings of shared belonging through the identification, maintenance, and performance of ethnic markers (Harrell 2001), or “styles” (Royce 1982)—which may include language, religion, culture, and common kinship—deemed different from those of another group. Therefore, attachment to one’s ethnic group intensifies because of social interaction (Barth 1969; Butler 1990), and the decision to identify with a particular ethnic community over other social groupings is situational and strategic (Atkin 1992; Gladney 1994; Royce 1982; Shahrani 1984).

Instead of understanding ethnic groups as ancient, natural, and enduring, social scientists have recognized the state’s increasingly active role in codifying ethnic categories and reifying ethnic loyalties so they appear to be concrete social realities (Brubaker 1996; Smith 1998, 145–58). Although we should be careful not to treat ethnic groups as coherent and homogeneous social units (Brubaker 2002, 166), we cannot ignore the real consequences of ethnic mobilization for political gains. Sometimes this process works in favor of state interests; sometimes it does not.

If mishandled by the state, ethnic diversity can breed political discord. The potential for an otherwise benign ethnic identity to become “malignant” and “fester” into ethno-nationalism, (i.e., the convergence of ethnic identity and sovereignty—or at least the aspiration for this political configuration) (Connor 1973)—threatens a multiethnic state’s territorial integrity. Clifford Geertz (1973, 260–61) reminds us:

To an increasing degree national unity is maintained not by calls to blood and land but by a vague, intermittent, and routine allegiance to a civil state. . . . Economic or class or intellectual disaffection threatens revolution, but disaffection based on race, language, or culture threatens partition, irredentism, or merger, a redrawing of the very limits of the state, a new definition of its domain.

To be sure, ethnic identity and national consciousness do not follow a neatly charted teleology—a topic Prasenjit Duara (1995) discusses in greater detail—and others have convincingly shown the difficulties predicting which ethnic groups are likely to engage in separatist movements (Horowitz 1981; Smith 1979). Indeed, ethnic identity remains an important social phenomenon precisely because it fluctuates, is in constant negotiation, and its boundaries shift unpredictably. Nevertheless, I want to draw attention to the tendency for outbreaks of protest and

violence framed in terms of “ethnic conflict” (Leibold 2016b) to be direct responses to a state’s ethnic praxes (Horowitz 1981, 167–68).

If communitarian violence (often referred to in its shorthand as “ethnic”) is precipitated by domestic policies, a fundamental question presents itself: Can modern states—or perhaps more accurately, their institutions—effectively squeeze multiple and sometimes oppositional ethnic identities into a coherent national vision? Marxist treatises stipulate that the state subjugates its citizenry through the use of violence carried out by a tightly bound institution (e.g., the government, the army, courts, prisons), or the repressive state apparatus (RSA) (Althusser 1971, 140–48). According to Althusser, this blueprint overlooked the ideological state apparatus (ISA)—that is, the myriad social domains (e.g., the media, literature, arts, and public schools) strung together by the ideology of the dominant class (Althusser 1971, 144–45). The ideology of the ruling class is infused into the ISA and confers to the individual his identity vis-à-vis the state. Operating on a subconscious level, the ideology of the ISA compels an individual to respond to the hypothetical police officer who is shouting “Hey, you there!” (Althusser 1971, 174).

Nation-building projects have turned to state schooling to “interpellate” disparate populaces. For example, colonial schools in British India sought to bring “peripheral” Indians into the cultural fold of the British metropole. In his “Minute on Education,” Thomas Macaulay (1835) urged to educate “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” Even in ostensibly “homogeneous” late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France, readily accessible and free public education was perhaps Paris’s most useful institution in its attempt to acculturate and “civilize” the people of the French countryside (Weber 1976, 303–38). The former Soviet Union provides a crowning example illustrating the potential for a vast centrally controlled education system to inculcate a national consciousness in culturally disparate peoples. Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) initially championed the use of indigenous languages (i.e., non-Russian) for many social settings, and early Soviet education—reflecting Lenin’s position—was, in fact, multilingual (Smith 1997). However, by the late 1930s, the Soviets, under the direction of Joseph Stalin (1878–1953), shifted their policy to effect the gradual Russification of education throughout the union (Fierman 2009; Kirkwood 1991; Laitin 1996).

The governments of the United States, Canada, and Australia employed similar policies toward indigenous peoples, and to similar ends. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the US federal government used schooling as a means to assimilate multiracial Native American children. As early as 1819, Congress passed legislation to appropriate funds for the education of Native American children. Decades later, in passing the 1887 Dawes General Allotment Act, sometimes referred to as the “Indian Emancipation Act,” Congress sought to accelerate the assimilation of native peoples by dividing tribal lands and reservations into private plots, a strategy lawmakers believed would dissolve tribal affinities.

Off-reservation boarding schools for native children were established shortly after Congress passed the Dawes Act. The first off-reservation schools were spearheaded by Richard H. Pratt (1840–1924), a Civil War veteran who commanded regiments of former slaves (Child 2000, 5–6; Lomawaima 1994, 2). Pratt predicted the removal of native children from their families combined with a Christian education far from their homes would destroy tribal loyalties. Pratt’s strategy to “immerse [the Native American] in civilization and keep him there until well soaked” (Utley 1964, xxi, cited in Lomawaima 1994, 4) was well received by state and federal legislators, and off-reservation Native American boarding schools began to spring up across many parts of the United States.

Though the US government did not establish or run the boarding schools according to a common plan, one can descry consistent goals among these institutions. Similar regulations and the common purpose of assimilating Native American children tied together the otherwise unconnected schools (Szasz 2005). Or as one informed observer has summarized, “The [Native American boarding school] was designed to separate children from all that was familiar to them—their families, tribes, languages, traditions, their very identities” (Child 2000, 6) while providing a space to instill discipline and teach students “practical” skills such as proper grooming habits, etiquette, and employable trades.¹²

Ethnicity and the State in China

Likewise, the CCP has devoted great energy and care to molding minzu identities since 1949, but its policies have been inconsistent. Although amalgamation (Ch. *ronghe*), or the melting together of Han and non-Han minzu, has undergirded the CCP’s ethnic praxes (Mackerras 1994; Zang 2015, 20–27), policies on minzu minority rights have vacillated between assimilatory and conciliatory phases. Other national campaigns underwent similar cycles of “tightening” (Ch. *shou*) and “loosening” (Ch. *fang*) (Baum 1997). For example, in the early 1950s CCP officials expected minority minzu to demonstrate only minimal loyalty to the party and its programs (Dreyer 1976, 25; Zang 2015, 23–24). In fact, officials believed minority minzu would be drawn naturally to the economically and culturally “superior” Han (Hyer 2016, 78) and therefore exercised patience toward the persistence of minority minzu customs (Dreyer 1968, 97–98; Mackerras 1994, 146; McMillen 1979, 113–14). However, large-scale radical socialist campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) violently suppressed expressions of minority minzu culture (Zang 2015, 23–24) to the point that some individuals denied their own minority status (Wu 1990).

12. The US Congress passed a bill in 2010 that recognized “years of official depredations, ill-conceived policies, and the breaking of covenants by the federal government regarding Indian tribes.” The bill also urged then-president Barack Obama to issue a formal apology (US Congress 2010).

The Reform Era's (1978–) first two decades witnessed a return to more loosened policies toward ethnic and religious expression. For example, minority minzu have been afforded a package of preferential policies (Ch. *youthui zhengce*) in family planning, education, and employment to help them gain their footing in an otherwise Han-dominated society (Ma 2009; Sautman 1998, 1999). Mosques have been restored and rebuilt (Gillette 2000; Gladney 1991, 162 and 175; Hillman 2004; McCarthy 2009, 147–48); Tibetan monasteries have once again become active centers for Buddhist learning, albeit under the party's watch (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998; Slobodník 2004); and the annual state-led hajj has been reinstated (Ma 2008, 10–12). Many minority minzu communities have even benefited economically from China's opening by constructing "ethnic villages" to attract domestic and foreign tourists (Oakes 1993; Schein 1997).

However, since taking office in 2012, Xi Jinping has tightened his grip on religious and cultural expression, especially among Muslims. Throughout Hui (Tungan or Chinese Muslim) communities, officials are "sinicizing" Islamic practices by removing crescents from mosques, halting the new construction of "Arab-style" mosques, and banning amplified calls to prayer recited in Arabic (Gan 2018). As will be discussed throughout this book, the CCP is also placing suffocating limits on the ways in which Uyghurs can express their ethno-religious identities.

Despite its inconsistent practices, the CCP attempts to preserve the integrity of its ethnic identification campaign and its system for managing its non-Han peoples by tracing and fixing contours for each minzu.¹³ Therefore, minzu identity is supposed to operate in a fundamentally different way from ethnic identity or race; minzu identity is (ideally) unchanging, inherently political, and directly buttressed by state (i.e., CCP) support (Ma 2010). At various times, the CCP has created, shaped, and constrained minzu identities according to Marxist-Leninist theory while provoking countervailing (non-Chinese) ethno-national consciousness among others.

Research on minority minzu identity has reflected the uneven results of the CCP's ethnic engineering projects. Long-term ethnographic research has brought attention to the creative ways by which minority minzu internalize, redefine, and assert their identities. These studies demonstrate that official minzu designations help to foster—and in some cases create where it never existed—strong group identification, even at the expense of a corporate Chinese identity.¹⁴ Other studies have overemphasized the role of the state and its institutions in this process, especially

13. Ma Rong (2011, 2012), an influential Peking University sociologist, has advocated for a "de-politicization" of ethnic issues in China. He recommends replacing the term *minzu*—when referring to the fifty-six ethno-national groups—with "ethnic group" (Ch. *zuqun*). His proposed model would also strip many minority minzu of the preferential policies that they are currently afforded. Although Ma's ideas are gaining traction within some academic and political circles, they have not replaced the current system. See also Leibold 2013.

14. Here I draw on the rich literature on ethnicity in China. For a short list, see Blum 2001; Borchigud 1995; Bovingdon 2010; Gillette 2000; Gladney 1996; Gladney 2004; Kaup 2000; Hansen; 1999; Harrell 2001; Hillman 2004; Hillman and Henfry 2006; Leibold and Chen 2014; Litzinger 2000; McCarthy 2009; Rudelson 1997; Schein 2000; Smith Finley 2013.

in the context of state schooling (Gladney 1990, 15; 1999; Kormondy 2002; Yu 2010; Zhu 2007a). As a result, this scholarship tends to overlook the importance of agency, or the ability to manipulate social structures to improve one's fortune (Sewell 1992, 20). Following this basic line of inquiry, this study will explore the tremendous scope within existing minzu and ethno-national categories for individual Uyghurs to embrace multiple identities. In doing so, it will also highlight instances when these individuals responded to competing nonstate ideologies—a process Michel Pêcheux (1982, 99–102) describes as “unevenness subordination.” Although Xinjiang Class students are “interpellated” by their boarding school education, profiles of these young adults will show how minority minzu bend, pull, stretch, and sometimes break beyond the limits of their state-ascribed identities.

Fitting the Uyghurs into the Weiwu'er Minzu

The CCP did not begin its state-building projects in the Tarim and Junggar Basins—present-day XUAR—from scratch. In fact, Xinjiang's territorial incorporation within a China-based state has remained largely uninterrupted since Manchu Qing forces (1644–1911) crushed Yaqub Beg's (1820–1877) Kashgar-based Islamic emirate and reconfigured the region as a province in 1884 (Clarke 2007; Kim 2004; Jacobs 2016). From the late nineteenth century onward, there have been only two brief yet notable interruptions to “Chinese” sovereignty in Xinjiang. The First East Turkestan Republic—officially named the Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan (TIRET) because of its strong ties to Pan-Islam (Forbes 1986)—was announced in November 1933, following widespread rebellion in Qumul (Ch. *Hami*), Turpan, and southern Xinjiang; but it was defeated by Hui forces loyal to the Guomindang (GMD) in 1934. Subsequently, from 1934 to 1941, Sheng Shicai, with Soviet backing, administered Xinjiang as a puppet state (Millward and Nabijan Tursun 2004, 78–81). In October 1944 rebellion against Chinese rule broke out in the northwest city of Ghulja (Ch. Yining), and a coalition army declared the establishment of the second East Turkestan Republic (ETR) (Millward 2007, 215–17). A government composed of GMD and ETR leaders formed in July 1946, but internal disputes severely undermined its legitimacy (Millward 2007, 220–24). The CCP's defeat of the GMD in 1949, and the mysterious crash of an airplane transporting ETR leaders to a meeting in Beijing, dashed all hopes of an East Turkestan independent of Chinese rule.

By this time, however, indigenous intellectuals were already promoting a collective Uyghur identity. Centuries before the CCP's recognition of a Weiwu'er minzu, Soviet meetings on the “nationality problem” (Edgar 2004; Hirsch, 2005; Slezkine 1994), and even before the Qing's conquest of Xinjiang, the sedentary Turkic-speaking dwellers of the Tarim Basin's oases (which would come to be

known as *Altisheher* in the local vernacular)¹⁵ began cementing collective identities based on linguistic, religious, and regional loyalties. By the seventeenth century, the region had completed its conversion to Islam. *Altisheher*'s Muslims then possessed linguistic and religious boundaries to separate them from the region's non-Muslim and non-Turkic-speaking Jews, Chinese, Mongols, and Manchu. Islam provided an essential vehicle for ethnic mobilization as it equipped its faithful with common stories, shared experiences, texts, and—through pilgrimages to important Islamic holy sites—it charted a religious landscape (Thum 2014).¹⁶ Over time, the elements of this protonational identity coalesced into a “discrete group consciousness” (Newby 2007, 16). Individual communities, then, filled this space with “cultural stuff”—a *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) in the form of an economic organization of society, common life-cycle rituals, social norms, and religious rituals (Bellér-Hann 2008).

Encroaching empires from both the East and West helped bring to fruition the region's germinating collective identities. Russian and Chinese (Qing and Republican) imperial practices “forced Uyghurs to adopt more strict perceptions of their cultural identity” (Roberts 2009, 365). Although indigenous elites debated over promoting Kashgarians in the south or Taranchis in the north as the touchstone for this national identity, they eventually rallied around the revival of the Uyghur ethnonym, a term that had fallen out of use for over five hundred years (Brophy 2016; Klimeš 2015). Cultural promotion societies—organizations responsible for, among other matters, popularizing education—began to “teach” this identity in their schools “making it an everyday category in the minds of literate Xinjiang people” (Schluessel 2009, 399). To be clear, Soviet, and later Chinese, bureaucrats did not invent a transregional ethnic identity and impose it on the Uyghurs (Gladney 1990). Rather, they “officialized” (Bourdieu 1999, 223–24) already existing identifications at a national level (Brophy 2005; Klimeš 2015; Roberts 2009).

Therefore, it should not be surprising that the Uyghurs have yet to be fully integrated into the Chinese mainstream (Clarke 2007), despite living within the borders of the PRC for over sixty years. In fact, CCP policy appears to have strengthened Uyghur ethno-national identity. By drawing administrative boundaries around the Tarim and Junggar Basins and naming it the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the CCP has further solidified a fluid Uyghur identity (Bovingdon 2004). In other words, XUAR's borders have bound the Uyghurs firmly to a political “homeland” (cf. Brubaker 1995), and Uyghur identity remains chthonic, or firmly rooted in the land (Dautcher 2009, 205). Facing growing numbers of Han people in the region, the promotion of Chinese language, and strict regulations on religious practices, Uyghurs choose cultural and, more recently, religious symbols to demarcate their

15. Meaning “six cities,” *Altisheher* is an indigenous term for East Turkestan—modern-day Xinjiang—and refers to the major oases located east and south of the Tian Shan Mountains (Yarkand [Yeken], Kashgar, Khotan, Kuche, Aksu, and Uch-Turfan). See Thum 2014.

16. These ideas have been inspired by Anderson's (1991) and Gellner's (1983) canonical works on nationalism.

ethno-national identity (Bovingdon 2002; Cesàro 2000; Smith Finley 2013; Smith Finley and Zang 2015).

The CCP has pushed back forcefully with its own set of policies aimed at transforming Uyghur identity (i.e., defined by sedentary Central Asian and Islamic cultures) to a hollowed-out Weiwu'er zu identity, one of fifty-six minzu comprising the Zhonghua minzu. Over 85 percent of Kashgar's Uyghur neighborhoods built in the style of Central Asian *mehelle* (single family homes organized around a mosque) have been demolished, and residents have been relocated to high-rise apartment compounds (Powers 2014b). To curb "extremist" Islamic dress, especially imported styles of veiling, authorities in Xinjiang launched "Project Beauty" (Ch. *liangli gongcheng*) in September 2011. The "engineering project" (Ch. *gongcheng*) requires women to shed face veils (Uy. *niqab*), *hijab*, and long robes (Uy. *jilbab*) while it promotes "modern fashion" represented by free-flowing hair and colorful *etles* fabric (Leibold and Grose 2016, 12–16). In April 2017 officials imposed a ban on "extreme" Islamic names, which forbids parents to give their children names that are "overly religious" and requires parents to change the names of children under the age of sixteen (Radio Free Asia 2017). Names once included in state-published handbooks on Uyghur naming practices—such as Hajim, Imam, and Mahmut (Sidiq 2013)—have been replaced; in public demonstrations of their compliance, some individuals have even posted these changes in *Xinjiang Daily* (2017, 4), the most widely circulated newspaper in the region.¹⁷

State-sponsored schooling, though, has stood apart as the key arena through which the CCP attempts to reify Weiwu'er zu identity (as well as other minority minzu) and realign it more closely to mainstream (Han) culture. Party leaders have long recognized the importance of using schools to recruit minority minzu in its state-building projects. To this end, the CCP has designated twenty-two institutions of higher learning for non-Han students, the most prestigious being the Minzu University of China (Ch. *Zhongyang minzu daxue*) in Beijing. In addition to these institutions, minority minzu classes (Ch. *minzu ban*) wherein students complete a year of preparatory classes before they begin their regular coursework, have been established in many Chinese universities (Sautman 1998, 83–86).

CCP officials have prioritized the expansion of state schooling, especially since Uyghur education levels are lower than Han (SCCO 2002, 563–67).¹⁸ Their efforts are paying off. Between 1982 and 2006 the percentage of Uyghurs over the age of six who received a primary school education increased from 37 percent to 53.1 percent;

17. One such post reads, "My son's former name was Qedirdin Mahmut (ID number: XXX). I changed his name to Qedirdin Memetyüsüp. We live at X County, Y Village."

18. The Chinese government rarely publicizes data revealing education levels or income broken down by minzu. However, in 2002, the State Council Census Office released statistics gathered in the year 2000 that measured the highest education level of individuals older than age six from fourteen minzu. According to these numbers, Han with a primary, middle, high school, and university education stood at 37.6 percent, 37.3 percent, 8.8 percent, and 3.8 percent, respectively. Uyghurs with a primary, junior high, high school, and university education stood at 53.1 percent 24.6 percent, 4.3 percent, and 2.7 percent, respectively.

those who received a junior high school (Ch. *chuzhong*)¹⁹ education doubled from 12 percent to 24.6 percent; and those who received a senior high school education (Ch. *gaozhong*)²⁰ has hovered around 5 percent (Gladney 1999, 73; SCCO 2002, 563–67, cited in Ma 2008, 368). The percentage of college-educated Uyghur adults has also risen, albeit modestly, from 0.1 percent in 1982 to 2.7 percent in 2000 (Gladney 1999, 73; SCCO 2002, 563–67, cited in Ma 2008), and statistics released in 2006 indicate that this number has reached 3.1 percent (CASTED 2006, 71). According to numbers calculated from the 2010 census, the most recent, highest level of education attainment among Uyghurs at the primary, junior high, senior high and postsecondary (university or vocational) levels stood respectively at 41.6 percent, 42.0 percent, 6.6 percent, and 6.3 percent (Liu 2014, 73).

Despite improving education levels nationwide, the CCP remains desperate in its quest to garner the loyalties of Uyghur youth and has turned to boarding schools to deliver the results it desires. We can trace the origins of Uyghur boarding schools to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and neighboring Tibetan areas—also hotbeds of political disloyalty (Hillman and Tuttle 2016; Sautman 2005; Yeh 2013)—in 1985, when officials developed the Tibet Class boarding school program (Ch. *Neidi Xizang gaozhong ban*) (Postiglione 2009; Postiglione and Jiao 2009; Zhu 2007a). The CCP predicted that well-equipped schools in neidi, which were to be staffed by highly trained teachers and administrators, would “produce a considerable cohort of trustworthy and knowledgeable minority cadres and specialists, and meanwhile orchestrate the generosity and benevolence of the central authorities and Han majority” (Wang and Zhou 2003, 98). Nearly thirty years after its conception, the Tibet Class remains a vital part of Tibet’s education system. Yearly enrollment in the Tibetan Class has reached over 1,600 individuals at the junior high level and 3,000 individuals at the senior high school level (Tibet News Online 2015), numbers which account for nearly 20 percent of school-aged children from the TAR (Postiglione 2009, 895). According to one overzealous Han scholar, the prestige associated with these boarding schools is so great that “whereas in the past, [Tibetans] considered lamas as first-class citizens (Ch. *yi deng gongmin*), now they believe those coming to neidi to study [in the Tibetan Classes] are first-class citizens” (Piao 1990, 46).

The decision to establish a similar program for Xinjiang’s minority minzu students was announced in 1999, after four years of violence rattled the region. In July 1995 Uyghurs in Khotan took to the streets demanding information about two popular imams—Islamic clergy—whom Chinese authorities had arrested. A Uyghur-led demonstration, unrelated to the incident in Khotan, was organized in Ghulja (Ch. *Yining*) on August 14 (Millward 2007, 328–29). In an incident unreported in Chinese media, a Uyghur cadre and three of his family members were violently murdered in Kuchar (Ch. *Kuche*) in 1996 (Smith Finley 2013, 10 and 202).

19. In the PRC junior high school typically includes grades seven through nine of its twelve-year system.

20. In the PRC senior high school typically includes grades ten through twelve of its twelve-year system.

In 1997 the Ghulja Incident and the ensuing violence that erupted in Ürümchi on February 25 shook social stability in Xinjiang once again.²¹ The insurrection added urgency for the CCP to enforce the policy recommendations laid out in the 1996 Central Committee drafted “Document No. 7,” which identified “radical” Islam as an example of rising Uyghur nationalism (Bovingdon 2010, 67–69; Millward 2007, 342). To gain an upper hand, the CCP decided to take the fight against Uyghur separatism, radical Islam, and—after 9/11—“terrorism” outside the autonomous region’s borders and into classrooms in neidi. From the perspective of the CCP, the Xinjiang Class was and is a matter of national security.

Methodology

This study seeks to “envision schools as instruments of national policy and sites for constructing social alternatives” (Ross 2000, 126). To this end, I draw on over thirty months of field research conducted in Beijing and several oases of the XUAR between February 2006 and July 2017. During this eleven-year period, I embarked on nine separate research trips to China. From February 2006 until June 2006, I was enrolled as an advanced visiting student (Ch. *gaoji jinxiu sheng*) at the Minzu University of China (MUC). While enrolled at MUC, I audited classes on the history and cultures of Xinjiang, and I was the only non-Han student participating in MUC’s beginning and intermediate Uyghur language courses. I remained in China until May 2008. However, by the fall 2007 semester, I had transferred my university affiliation to the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE). In 2010 I returned to Beijing for six months as a visiting scholar at Beijing Normal University (BNU). I made seven consecutive research trips to China each summer from 2011 to 2017.

As have many other scholars, I encountered several obstacles along the way. While affiliated with MUC, I was told by the director of the university’s Institute of International Education (Ch. *Guoji jiaoyu xueyuan*) that my research was too (politically) “sensitive” (Ch. *mingan*) for the school to support. I was lectured for thirty minutes about the “troubles” (Ch. *mafan*) conducting research in Xinjiang could bring to the university and myself. The school official urged me to examine the minority minzu of Yunnan province because they are “harmonious” (Ch. *hexie*). I had little choice but to change my school affiliation if I desired to carry out my research.

After completing my doctoral coursework at Indiana University’s Department of Central Eurasian Studies, I returned to China in 2010 for six months of research. During this period, I attempted to gain access to one of Beijing’s Xinjiang Classes.

21. The Ghulja Incident likely occurred in response to CCP-imposed restrictions on the practice of *meshrep*, or the secret gatherings for Uyghur men whose members abide by Islamic codes of conduct, and on other religious activities deemed “illegal” (Ch. *feifa zongjiao huodong*) (Millward 2007, 329–34; cf. Pawan, Dawut, and Kurban 2017).

My request was aided by one of BNU's senior faculty members, the individual who invited me to his school and who conducted research on national-level Tibetan boarding schools. Coincidentally, this particular faculty member was a former classmate of the principal at a local Xinjiang Class. My faculty sponsor at BNU arranged a date with the principal for us to visit the school together. As the date of the planned visitation drew near, my faculty mentor shared a bit of information to his friend that he had not previously disclosed—I was an American researcher. My invitation to the boarding class was immediately revoked, but I continued my research focusing on Uyghur graduates of the program.

I spoke with over sixty Uyghur graduates of the Xinjiang Class during the total research period. Despite my use of snowball sampling, a method in which the researcher relies on key contacts to meet others within the targeted group (Bernard 2006, 193), my informants are representative of the Xinjiang Class's student body (see Chapter 1). Participants included thirty-three women and thirty-one men who graduated from eleven of the original twelve cities hosting a Xinjiang Class. Also included in this study are individuals from the Xinjiang Class's first seven cohorts (2000–2006). The hometowns of my informants are equally representative of the Xinjiang Class's enrollment quotas. That is, 70 percent of my informants (forty-five out of sixty-four individuals) were raised in southern Xinjiang (e.g., Kashgar, Khotan, Aksu, and Atush) before enrolling in the boarding school program. This figure compares closely with the widely published requirement stipulating that 80 percent of all Xinjiang Class students should be from southern Xinjiang (see Chapter 1).

Through regular interactions with these young highly educated individuals, I sought to learn about their ethno-national identities, their personal commitments to Islam, and their abilities to navigate between two seemingly distinct sets of cultural practices—Uyghur and Han. The majority of data for this research was collected through participant observation of their post-boarding school lives and semistructured interviews. I conducted semistructured interviews in the language preferred by the informant. However, by October 2010, after completing an advanced intensive one-on-one Uyghur language course, I interviewed my interlocutors in Uyghur.

In some regards, my research methodology differed significantly from the majority of research conducted on minority minzu boarding schools and, more broadly, minority minzu education in China (Chen 2008; Hansen 1999; Yu 2010; Zhao 2010; Zhu 2007a, 2007b). To begin, my research includes only those students who graduated from the Xinjiang Class. Unable to gain access to a boarding school, I hinged my research on the participation of graduates, and my research was conducted outside the confines of a school. Although visitations to the boarding schools would have enriched this study, in other ways conducting research outside of the schools proved to be rewarding. School officials never monitored my activities (see, for example, Hansen 1999), and my informants could speak frankly about their experiences. Not confined to a campus or classroom, I met with individuals at

coffee shops, soccer matches, informal language exchanges, Muslim restaurants and cafeterias, and celebrations organized by Uyghur university students.

This study is also longitudinal. As I stated earlier, I carried out my research between February 2006 and July 2017. On each “focused revisit”—a method valued because of its potential for applying new theories to the field as well as providing opportunities to record important historical changes (Burawoy 2003, 647; Foster et al. 1979)—I attempted to reconnect with my informants. I used follow-up interviews to gauge whether students’ attitudes and opinions toward the Xinjiang Class and their ethno-national identities had changed. Although there are several individuals in this study with whom I spoke on only one occasion, I met with a majority of informants on multiple occasions over a span of several years.

During all components of the research program, my first priority was to protect the safety and anonymity of my interlocutors. Because of the political sensitivity associated with conducting research on the Uyghurs (see Smith Finley 2006), I only recorded handwritten notes of my interviews in a journal I kept with me at all times. Although I did not keep audio records of my interviews, I have strived to keep all quotes from my interlocutors as close to verbatim as possible.

Limitations

I have made every effort to conduct methodologically sound research. However, there are several limitations to this study that must be addressed. First, the majority of data have been collected from the responses of sixty-four graduates of the Xinjiang Class. Statistically speaking, this number, compared with the total number of Xinjiang Class students during its twenty-year history, is unimpressive. Nonetheless, I trust that the richness of these interactions can compensate for my inability to recruit more participants. Second, I recognize that my status as a foreign researcher may have elicited certain types of responses from my interlocutors. As later chapters will make clear, the individuals included in this study expressed strikingly different attitudes toward the CCP, Han people, and other matters, compared to individuals who were included in studies about minority minzu education in China that had been conducted by Han researchers (see, for example, Chen 2008; Yang 2017; Yu 2010; Zhao 2010; Zhu 2007). Recognizing that my own status may have influenced my informants’ comments—as Han researchers’ statuses may have affected what their respondents told them—I do not seek to discredit previous research but only hope readers will view my findings as an interesting counternarrative. Nevertheless, one can at least assert that a researcher not obviously identified with any group directly involved in a contentious situation is less likely to introduce a bias by evoking positive or negative group feelings in informants (Bernard 2006, 373; Starn 2011).

Structure of the Book

This book is organized into four main chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter introduces the institutional hallmarks of the Xinjiang Class. It carefully examines the CCP's current objectives for maintaining costly boarding schools for Uyghur students. It draws on documents drafted by China's Ministry of Education, Xinjiang's Department of Education, and individual schools hosting a Xinjiang Class, as well as oral histories, to paint a vivid picture of the daily lives of Xinjiang Class students. The chapter pays careful attention to the ways Xinjiang Class students both comply with and resist school policies.

Chapter 2 assesses the effectiveness of the program in meeting its political goals. It demonstrates the ways in which Xinjiang Class graduates embrace and assert an ethno-national identity that is sometimes in contradistinction to a corporate Chinese identity. This identity, expressed through renewed efforts to practice Islam, the insistence on speaking Uyghur, and the reluctance to befriend Han classmates, persists after graduation from the Xinjiang Class. Paradoxically, the performance of transregional and transnational identities is possible because these individuals participated in the boarding school program and embraced some elements of "Chinese" identity.

Chapter 3 reveals the tendency for Xinjiang Class graduates to seek opportunities abroad or in *neidi* instead of returning to Xinjiang. China's Ministry of Education and Xinjiang's provincial-level government place pressure on Xinjiang Class graduates to return after their formal education. Yet many delay their homecomings indefinitely. I interpret these students' decisions as a tacit expression of ethno-national identity and an unwillingness to pay back their "debt" to the party.

The final chapter follows Xinjiang Class graduates' return to the XUAR. Contrary to the political goals of the program, few of its graduates return to the region with the intention of serving the party, their country, or even their hometowns. More often, institutional restraints that cripple mobility in China, unrelenting pressure from family members, and inconveniences adhering to Islamic practices in *neidi* compel these individuals to return. The return, however, only marks the beginning of a sometimes-frustrating process of reintegration. The second part of this chapter describes how these young adults reacclimate to daily life in Xinjiang. I focus on the difficulties these individuals experience in their social and professional lives.

Conclusion

I think that we will continue to thrive as a people. And I think that our future is going to be bright.

Méningche bizning millet dawamliq güllep yashnaydu. Kelgüsimiz parlaq bolidu dep oylaymen

—Ilham, Xinjiang Class Graduate, Hangzhou

In February 2015 the inconceivable happened. Tursun, a twenty-three-year-old Uyghur man, was placed into custody at an undisclosed detention center in China after allegedly traveling to Afghanistan to engage in global jihad. He had previously studied in the Xinjiang Class; in fact, he was only one of six students from his school in rural Khotan to be accepted into the program. In a nationally televised interview, the young Uyghur man—shackled in his chair and wearing a prison jumpsuit—spoke fondly of his days in the boarding school. The dorms were spacious, the food was delicious, and the teachers were caring, he recalled. Although he took the college entrance examination twice, his scores were not high enough to attend his university of choice. Disillusioned with China's education system and the likely impossibility of succeeding in Xinjiang without a university degree, Tursun sought another path. While working as a laborer in Xinjiang, he met a religious man who convinced Tursun to become his pupil, or *talip*. He even promised the young man a passport that would allow him to attend an Islamic university in Egypt. The document never materialized. According to Tursun, the man threatened him at knifepoint to either join jihadists in Central Asia or be killed. Fearing for his life, Tursun complied. He was loaded into a car with thirty other men and driven to a remote location in Afghanistan. Before long, he was detained during a raid and repatriated. Awaiting trial in Xinjiang, he hopes others can learn from his mistakes. He offered the following advice: “At all costs, do not be tricked by extremists and share my fate” (Sina 2015).

To be sure, cases similar to Tursun's are extremely rare, but the episodic antistate violence in Xinjiang that began thirty years ago has sent a clear warning to the CCP; it is losing precious ground in its struggle to integrate the Uyghurs into the Zhonghua minzu. In the short term, the party-state seeks to impose a semblance of

stability with violence of its own. Paramilitary patrols regularly sweep through areas where Uyghurs predominate to snuff out “terrorism,” “separatism,” and “extremism” (Millward 2007, 341–43; Smith Finley 2013, 237–38). Armored vehicles parade through Xinjiang’s major oasis cities in daily spectacles of strength. Government personnel stage public burnings of “illegal” religious paraphernalia to symbolically exorcise and purify the region (*People’s Daily Online* 2014). Moreover, since Chen Quanguo’s appointment as XUAR’s Party Secretary in August 2016, authorities have detained thousands of Uyghurs in “concentration reeducation centers” (*Foreign Policy* 2018; Zenz 2018). The state’s message is explicit: all forms of resistance—however peaceful—will be quashed.

Meanwhile, the CCP is waging an ideological war that reaches deep into Uyghur culture. Government censors have banned Uyghur-language books, songs, and poetry that may be interpreted as political critiques (Harris 2001; Smith Finley 2007c). State-employed historians and museum curators have rewritten the region’s history to strengthen otherwise tenuous links between Xinjiang, its Turkic populations, and Chinese polities. For example, a statue of General Ban Chao (32–102 CE) towers over Kashgar to convince local Uyghurs that their home has been ruled by the Chinese since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) (Bovingdon and Tursun 2004). Likewise, the Xinjiang Regional Museum in Ürümqi showcases Han-centric histories to undermine Uyghur claims to indigeneity (Hayes 2016). Officials even manufacture linguistic bonds between Uyghurs and Han by elevating Putonghua over minority minzu languages as the lingua franca for education, commerce, and law in Xinjiang (Dwyer 2005; Schluessel 2007). These measures share common goals—to pull the Uyghurs’ allegiances eastward toward the Han “central plains” and push them away from their Turkic-Muslim neighbors in Central Asia.

State schooling is the frontline of this ideological fight. These tightly controlled spaces provide the CCP with bulwarks for the party’s values and primed canvases on which the CCP’s visions for the nation and national belonging are drawn and displayed (Joniak-Lüthi 2015, 58). However, many schools in Xinjiang lack basic classroom technology, their teachers are undertrained, and above all, after the final classes each day, students return to communities and homes where Uyghur culture pervades. Therefore, the state’s idealized portraits of the “Weiwu’er” people and their place in the Zhonghua minzu are constantly being smudged.

Officials have responded to this interference with national boarding schools—the Xinjiang Class—to sculpt students into subjects of the state. Modeled after a similar program for Tibetans, the Xinjiang Class enrolls 80 percent of its student body from rural and nomadic areas, the vast majority of whom are Uyghur, and educates them for four years at schools scattered throughout central, eastern, and coastal China. The Xinjiang Class’s goals are scholastic and political. Academically, the boarding schools prepare students for China’s national college entrance examination. During their intensive coursework, students study the national curriculum

and Chinese language. In fact, Xinjiang Class students are expected to speak fluent Chinese after four years of immersive learning.

Politically, the Xinjiang Class is intended as a cultural and ideological boot camp to create a cohort of Uyghur elite who are grateful for the CCP and committed to protecting “minzu unity.” To this end, Xinjiang Class students are thrust into a Han cultural milieu while they adhere to strict school policies, many of which are aimed at weakening religious consciousness. This sterilized environment—where information, daily routines, diets, and access to people and places beyond the gates of the boarding schools are scrupulously controlled by officials and teachers—is supposed to condition Uyghur students (or interpellate them) as always-already members of the *Zhonghua minzu*.

This examination of the memories and behaviors of Xinjiang Class graduates casts doubts on the party-state’s interpellative potential. Despite lavishing energy and resources on the Xinjiang Class, the CCP is waging an endless war. Although the CCP controls the resources to define “*Weiwu’er zu*” and *Zhonghua minzu* categories and reify them in a boarding school education, it cannot contain countervailing, nonstate formulations of Uyghurness. Contrary to the CCP’s plans, the Xinjiang Class has strengthened—and, in some cases, activated where it never existed—a specifically “Uyghur” consciousness.

At times, Xinjiang Class graduates identified, asserted, and even exaggerated key “ethnic markers” (Keyes 1976) of Uyghurness in contradistinction to Han ethnicity. In ways similar to Uyghurs in the XUAR (Béller-Hann 2002, 2007; Bovington 2010; Cesàro 2000; Smith Finley 2002, 2013), my informants segregated themselves from their Han peers. They organized “Uyghur”-only soccer teams, hosted exclusive cultural events, and avoided romantic relationships with Han people. Xinjiang Class graduates also maintained ethnic boundaries by demonstrating their preference to speak Uyghur, despite (or in spite of) their monolingual Chinese education. Concerned about the survival of their mother tongue, these individuals encouraged each other to speak and read Uyghur in otherwise Han environments. Finally, many of my informants embodied Islamic practices after they were no longer subject to the Xinjiang Class’s harsh punishments for engaging in religious activity. Indeed, Islam remained an important reference point in Uyghur identity constellations among Xinjiang Class graduates (see Hale 2004).

Although they are perhaps the most salient, “*Weiwu’er zu*” and “Uyghur” collectivities are not the only social categorizations available to Xinjiang Class graduates. For instance, my informants often sought membership in transnational communities by stretching the boundaries of Uyghurness to overlap with global Muslim and Turkic identities, a strategy also employed by Uyghur elite in diaspora (Kuşçu Bonnenfant 2018, 92). To this end, Xinjiang Class graduates scoured websites hosted by Muslims in foreign countries for “authentic” instructions on pious behavior, participated in Qur’anic reading groups, adopted religious dress, and aspired to travel to countries with large Muslim and Turkic populations.

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