

Cultural Genocide of Uyghur Minority in China

Alex Kim

Korea International School

Abstract:

Uyghurs are a south-eastern Turkish-speaking group of people who are mostly Sunni Muslims. Today, this group of people primarily lives in an autonomous region called Xinjiang in China. Having experienced a long history of oppression under Chinese rule, this cultural minority group has experienced and still experiencing systematic annihilation of both culture and social identity. The Chinese government enforced to do so by "colonizing" and assimilating both ethnicity and religion of the Uyghur. The overall purpose of this research paper is to uncover and explore the Chinese government's" unjustified treatment of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang. This research paper does an in-depth, comprehensive analysis of Uyghurs in China by mainly making use of Stanton's ten classification stages of genocide. Thus, the research paper concludes with a discussion of several recent cases and reports about the world reflecting on the cultural eradication of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

I. Introduction

Culture has created its niche as an important sphere to the development of current and future generations, whether when the people in question are a major or minor group. Through culture and knowledge, minority groups have something that can anchor them and their identity within the community and allows them to live distinctly in a community with major groups. China has through the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) formulated policies that have affected the operations of

the Uyghur in China. The definition for cultural genocide that is given in the work of Finnegan (2020) is that it is a process by which forcible transfer of children takes place, systematic exiling of people, prohibition of their language, destruction of any material printed in te language of such people , or the destruction of the monuments they have set up for their religious practices (Novic, 2016, p. 25). Acts of such nature do not lead to a state in which a group of people become physically extinct,

but one in which their culture is detrimentally affected. With the definition, it is clear that cultural genocide would not result in the physical but cultural annihilation of communities to the point of erasing their identity (Negri, 2013, p. 5). The policies that the Chinese government has formulated towards the Xinjiang have increased the level of colonization of the Chinese and eroded the autonomy enjoyed by the Uyghur. They have been forced to assimilate both ethnically and religious; their resistance has been termed terrorism. The purpose of this paper is to show that China's treatment of the Uyghur is unjustified given the country's obligation to all of its citizens; China's unrest portrayed through the country's determination to assimilate the Uyghur forces them from the practice of Islam, Arabic and Madras to Chinese and Mandarin.

II. Uyghurs Background

Uyghurs are south-eastern Turkish-speaking people who are mostly Sunni Muslims. There are approximately 11-12 million Uyghurs in Xinjiang today. The majority of the Uyghur population primarily lives in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), which is located in the northwestern corner of China.

Since the 8th century, the Uyghur Empire, along with the Mongol Empire, became one of the largest strongholds in China controlling majorities of various tribes in Central Asia. At the end of the 18th century, Qing China has been gradually weakened by various conflicts, which eventually resulted in the Xinjiang province being independent of Qing control, as the Qing empire was not able to effectively control remote regions from its capital city. Followed by the downfall of the Qing Dynasty and the rise of the Republic of China, a rebellion happened in the 1930s, which established the first Uyghur state in 1933. However, this Uyghur independence did not last very long, as the Han Empire took full control over the land of Uyghurs after only one year. Rebel figures such as Ahmetjan Qasimi and Isa Yusuf Alptekin emerged between 1944 and 1949 in an attempt to establish the Second East Turkestan Republic. Yet again, this movement for independence had been brought to an end in 1949.

In that year, the president of China, Mao Zedong invited Ahmetjan Qasimi along with other Uyghur leaders to discuss the independence of Uyghurs. Mysteriously, the passenger plane in which the Uyghur leaders were on board faced a tragic accident during its flight to Beijing. This tragic incident that resulted in the death of a group of Uyghur

leaders was secretly kept under the radar of public media and news for several months until the People's Liberation Army of China intrudes on the region. Isa Yusuf Alptekin, an Uyghur leader who was not on board, led a diaspora of the Uyghur population from Xinjiang to other neighboring regions or territories. In fact, Turkey accepted about 2000 Uyghur refugees at the time.

One of the primary aspects that the Ughyur considers crucial is religion, which is heavily influenced by traditional Sunni Islam.

Case 2: How the Uyghur genocide occurred

A comprehensive analysis of the events that characterized the Uyghur genocide can be analyzed in a number of sections arranged according to the ten stages of genocide. The stages presented do not necessarily follow each other progressively as presented. Some of the stages can coexist with each other (Stanton, 2016). The stages given by Stanton (2016) are classification, symbolization, discrimination, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, persecution, extermination, and denial (Stanton, 2016).

Classification

The purpose of the classification stage is to set the stage for the “us versus them” idea. It

is crucial for the state and society to emphasize the common similarities between such groups rather than differences. Differences will continue the “us versus them” or the “othering” idea, which could be seen as the first step to genocide. The process of classifying the Uyghur as “other” began when Xinjiang was integrated into the larger Chinese republic. Jakimów & Barabantseva (2016) contends that citizenship in China is always a function of the social and ethnic position of the people concerned. As such, the Han were seen as the most important extraction from the Chinese nation while other groups such as the Tibetans and the Ughur (the minority groups) were regarded as weak and backward (Barabantseva, 2011). The classification process was not just against the Uyghur, but against all minority groups in China. The Uyghurs are mostly Islamic and live in countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Reports indicate that some of the officials from Xinjiang participated in activities that were banned by the government, and were excluded from the positions they used to occupy in government; the clarion call was that the region is a threat to the unity of China, and the officials for Beijing in the region ought to be tough in fighting against terrorism (Jia, 2019). With such reports, the Uyghur were

identified and classified along with the separatists, terrorists and in some cases, gangsters.

Symbolization

Symbolization means that the “other” group of people will be associated with certain names and symbols or signs. During this stage, the othering of a particular group becomes visibly evident through the use of symbols or names. The “other” group of people are considered as “outsiders”. The majority population has the responsibility to ignore such symbols and their meaning. The symbols used for “othered” groups do not have to be the ones forced upon them. In some cases, the symbols the groups use can be criminalized and made to be socially unacceptable such that the groups in question are forced not to use them. Examples of symbols such as wearing long beards, wearing headscarves (such as the burqa, hijab, niqab), and ex) fasting during Ramadan in public are commonly associated with Islam tradition. The government has for instance associated the Islamic symbols with terrorism and made it the responsibility of the Chinese people to disregard the symbols and make them meaningless. For instance, Kuo (2015) reports that China went ahead to ban people from having long beards or having headscarves in public or engaging in any Islamic religious activities.

The move against displaying such symbols was intended against muslim extremists.

Discrimination

When a certain group is associated with some symbols in question, law enforcement agencies and the society have the opportunity to discriminate a group. The discrimination gets institutionalized in time through legislation to ensure a certain group of people do not have their rights. A number of rights are deprived such as voting, civil, citizenship, freedom of expression, family and marital rights. The Uyghurs have been subjected to discrimination on a number of fronts. For instance, banning religious symbols interferes with freedom of religion. Solomon (2016) reports that the Chinese government took a step and ordered Xinjiang citizens to return the passports. According to the government, restrictions of the activities of the Uyghurs could be traced to the unrest and extremism witnessed in the region. With the ban, the government said that it is only the criminals that would be affected in their travels outside the country and not ordinary people. The phrase ordinary people in this case would be interpreted to mean the Han Chinese, while the Uyghur Muslims are classified as criminals because of their religious affiliations.

The ban on the one-child policy in 2015 is said to target the Uyghurs. The previous regulations on reproduction allowed ethnic minorities to have the freedom they needed to reproduce as they wished. However, a policy that was implemented in 2017 allowed Han Chinese to be at par with the Uyghurs and their rate of reproduction. The policy may not discriminate against the Uyghur but it intends to ensure that the Han increase in population in areas such as Xinjiang. The government went a step further to encourage inter-ethnic marriages so that the Uyghurs could be assimilated into the Han Chinese. The goal is to limit or curtail the Uyghur influence on children.

Dehumanization

Discrimination becomes institutionalized and the discriminated group begins to face dehumanization. Discrimination might be a legal phenomenon, but dehumanization is a social one. Through hate propaganda, the victim in question gets deprived their humanity and begin experiencing name-calling and being seeing in a different light that rids them their humanity. The involvement of the international community is through sanctions. The written law protects ethnic minorities from discrimination, but state media determines the way the general population perceives

Muslims. Luqiu and Yang (2018) surveyed to determine how the state media in China perceived Muslims and Islam and the effect of the perception on Muslims. The findings indicate that news outlets and media sources are under government control (Luqiu & Yang, 2018). Any agenda is aired to the general population to the point perceptions and stereotypes are perpetrated. Muslims and Islam receive negative reports on media outlets. The findings are consistent with what Morgan and Poynting (2012) says about Muslims as being globally recognized as the “folk devil.”

The government prohibits education on matters of Islam so that the national Chinese ideology can be preserved. As such, Muslim traditions have been misunderstood and portrayed negatively. Further, the study by Luqiu and Fang (2018) determined that Muslims are portrayed through stereotypes. When Muslims are associated with terrorism and crime, they are dehumanized at least covertly. Associating Muslims with terrorism dehumanizes them and averts to their being persecuted, tortured and killing. The BBC (2015) reports that there are several murals in Xinjiang that ignite tensions against the Uyghurs they show the desire to have them killed as terrorists by the PRC. The murals show the manner in which the public perceives Uyghur Muslims and Islam in

general. The Chinese do not have a balanced access to information regarding the Uyghur from outside China. They have to rely on local media stations, which have been compromised and therefore made to be biased in their reporting.

Organization

Organization is the fifth stage in the genocide development stages. The genocide graduates into organized persecution at this point. This point in the genocide is characterized by the purchase and distribution of fire arms to armed militia groups so that they can act against the victimized groups. This is where the involvement of the international community is to stop the distribution of arms and military gear to the perpetrators. However, since China is a militarized and armed country, the stage use of militia may be hard to recognize by outsiders. There are reports showing that there is special training and deployment of militia groups in Xinjiang in what has been called a counter-terrorist activity. Gracie (2015) reports that there has been a security campaign launch in Xinjiang to respond to violent attacks by several groups in Kashgar. There is more military presence in Xinjiang and other regions with majority of Muslims compared to areas with Han majorities. Wu (2019)

reports that there was another paramilitary drill in Pamir that was aimed at terror thugs in the anti-terror campaign. The manner in which the drills and deployments have been framed makes it difficult to involve the international community. The state and the military in China act in a threatening manner towards the Uyghur, even though the power dynamics are greatly in favor of the state and military. The sanctions by the U.S. government against China's move came way too late when their impact is dismal.

Polarization

Polarization takes place during the six stage. This is where there is discrimination against certain victim group goes a step further by involving the population and having it polarized. Polarization is responsible for the exaggeration of the "us versus them" idea so that it gets supported by a majority of the population. Propaganda that contains hateful information gets spread to a wider audience through media sources. Polarization through the legislative agenda was by having laws and policies that prevented marriage between people from different groups. In 2019, the State Council's information office published a white paper stating that "the East Turkistan state has never existed" (Jia, 2019). In stating

as it did, the notion created is one where terrorists and separatists acted in a manner that eventually distorted what was contained in history and facts. Further, Jia (2019) says that people in ethnic groups within Xinjiang want to be together with people from other regions in the country. As such, the region could be construed as the best development stage in its history through sustainable economic development with a harmonious and stable social environment, continuous improvement in the lives of the people, sound religious development and the desire to be unified under one rule through the Chinese Communist Party. The polarization agenda was through the aim to eradicate the Uyghur identity and the history of the people. A further aim was to convince the population that Uyghur is a threat to peace of China by framing them as a “foreign terrorist”.

Preparation

Preparation is the seventh stage where the authoritative body involved in the genocide sets the stage for the mass murder of the victim group. The state does this through the use of “covert language”; the state proves the attack(s) against a victim group to be reasonable by backing it up as “counter-terrorism”. China did this with the Uyghur by increasing their number in “re-education

camps”. These camps send tens to hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs to factories to do forced labor. As reported by Cumming-Bruce (2018), the Chinese government continued to deny that the re-education camps at first, but as increased evidence for the existence of these camps was acquired, China eventually admit the existence of those camps in Xinjiang. Nonetheless, China defended themselves by claiming the camps to be training centers. The government said that they were vocational education and training centers aimed at providing the citizens of Xinjiang with the education and skills they need for their world. The argument is that such training was conducted voluntarily. The Chinese officials further reasoned that the camps were established as means to prevent “terrorist activities” in Xinjiang.

The contrary view by many eyewitness, journalists and refugees is that those re-education camps were not voluntary. The report is that any Uyghur in Xinjiang who stuck to Islamic practices that include wearing religious symbols or objects was identified as a threat to the state. It is because of this threat that they were deported to the local camps. Leaked documents of official Chinese documents to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) shows that

the camps were built for “torture, punishments, and brainwashing for cultural assimilation”. The belief of the state is that camp inmates must speak Mandarin and that they must not practice Islam. The United Nations does not recognize the situation to be cultural genocide let alone seeing it as genocide (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2019). There are only 22 member states in the UN Human Rights Council that criticized China for the mistreatment of the Uyghurs and called for an end to the mass detentions, yet again avoiding the term genocide (HRW, 2019). Low commitment in the sanctioning of the Chinese government has allowed for the persecution of the Uyghurs.

Persecution

In the Eighth stage, individuals in the group are “actively persecuted”. The persecution of such individuals takes place in a number of ways. The individuals experience the expropriation of their property. Some get deported to ghettos or concentration camps. In some cases, they are forced to sterilize or abort. Torture and killings increase dramatically in the number of cases recorded. Uyghur women population are forced to perform abortions. Instead of directly killing off the Uyghur population, this could be an evident attempt of China to

prevent the birth of the future generations of Uyghur. The abortions attest to the decline in the population of the Uyghur since 2015.

Extermination and Denial

Extermination and denial are the ninth and tenth stages respectively. Extermination may not yet be evident, but the Chinese government continues to deny being aware of what is taking place. The ninth stage is made distinct by activities such as “brutal mass killings, disembodiment of bodies, torture, mass rapes, destruction of cultural or religious properties and sites”. Organizations and institutions from most countries view a “genocide” taking place. The Chinese government has been encouraged to take immediate measures to prevent such exterminations and intervene.

Denial takes place throughout the atrocities and at the end of the atrocities. It can take place concurrently with other stages. In denial stage, the governing body denies the crimes committed on its account. The governing body then moves to demolish any sort of evidence that could prove the genocide. The denial stage is already underway since the Chinese government tries hard to maintain that its involvement is for population maintenance and that it is unaware of what is actually going on. This

can be done effectively by the Chinese government because they have full control over the internet, social media, and even news mediums. Through this control over citizens, the government can largely influence the populations' "opinions and knowledge about national history".

Case Study 3: How the World Views the Uyghur

According to a report by Kurniawan, Maulidya, Sa'ban and Indrawati (2020), the manner in which the world views the Uyghur comes from different perspectives as shaped by different media outlets. The perception of the Chinese government regarding the Uyghur is that they were eliminating ethnic problems with the aim of protecting Xinjiang as Chinese territory. Xinjiang is a wealthy province within China, given its economic performance. Xinjiang is beautiful both naturally and culturally to the point of attracting a large number of tourists into China (Kurniawan, Maulidya, Sa'ban, & Indrawati, 2020). The existence of Xinjiang is important for an investment by the Chinese government through the Belt Road Initiative.

Any phenomenon that takes place in a country gets reported by international agencies. News given by the agencies gets reported through media such as newspapers,

magazines, journals, newspaper articles, etcetera. Through mass media, it is possible to develop culture as argued by Setiawan (2013), where discourse emerges as a term used by scholars in the analysis of thoughts, images, ideas and other practices that make up what constitutes anthropology. When news as presented is viewed from a content perspective, stories given by journalists are driven by the agenda of a number of parties (Kurniawan, Maulidya, Sa'ban, & Indrawati, 2020). As reported by Rahmayuni (2020), the Chinese mass media reported that it needed to defend the country, despite the ethnic discrimination reported (Rahmayuni, 2020). According to the Guo Ji Ri Bao, news concerning persecution of the Uyghurs was exaggerated. The agency reported that the camps were put up to facilitate honesty training and for festive activities.

On the other hand, the BBC (a mass media agency from the West) reported that ethnic minorities (the Uyghur in this case) were discriminated against by Beijing. According to BBC (2018), the Uyghur were detained in camps where they were reeducated in a manner that led to loss of their culture. The news media agencies of the west have also viewed the activities of the Chinese government and the involvement of other communities as a possibility (BBC, 2018).

The reports from Western media concerning the Uyghur is affected by the way such media portrays China.

The reporting given by different countries through their media outlets reflects the interests of these countries concerning the subject matter. Afriyansyah (2015) reports that the significant ideological differences between the United States and the Soviet Union contributed to the difference in reporting. The United States has a liberal ideology, while the Soviet Union has a communist ideology. Lubis (2017) reports that China carried and continues to carry on with its socialist communist ideology. With this difference intact, it is conceivable that Western media and Chinese media will differ in presenting news concerning the Uyghur. The aim of the Chinese media when reporting activities relating to the Uyghur is to defend their country so that the news they present is one that benefits the position that the country takes. Western media (BBC, ABC News, the New York Times, etcetera) reports what they say to be the truth concerning the Uyghur and in the process fail to consider the objective role of Beijing.

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