



The predatory state and coercive assimilation: The case of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang

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Received: 1 July 2021 / Accepted: 14 February 2022

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Abstract

We use the predatory theory of the state to explain China's violent assimilationist campaign targeting the Uyghurs, a predominantly Muslim minority group in China that constitutes a population majority in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Our analysis suggests that growing political centralization under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, combined with technological changes that reduced the costs of implementing predatory policing in Xinjiang and elevated the perceived economic benefits from integration, contributed to the choice of destructive cultural assimilation rather than respect for the rights and autonomy of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. While the economics literature sometimes describes the political economy of China's growth miracle as the byproduct of a constrained Leviathan, the present paper shows that a predatory theory of the state is more useful for understanding how a cultural genocide can occur alongside economic growth.

Keywords China · Xinjiang · Predatory theory of the state · Uyghurs · Repression · Assimilation · Wealth-destroying states

JEL classification H11 · P26 · B52

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1 Introduction

In 2017, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ramped up its campaign of repression against the predominantly Muslim Uyghur populace in China's far-west Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Upwards of one million Uyghurs have been detained arbitrarily by CCP authorities and sent indefinitely to a network of reeducation and forced-labor camps during the administration of XUAR party secretary Chen Quanguo (Zenz, 2019a, b).¹ Satellite imagery, coupled with interviews with former detainees, document nearly three hundred prison camps and detention centers built since 2017 in Xinjiang (Rajagopalan et al., 2020).

The extrajudicial detention of Uyghurs coincides with massive investment by the CCP in electronic surveillance technology, aimed at monitoring the speech, habits, relations, and religiosity of Xinjiang's ten-million-plus Uyghurs to assess their loyalty (Roberts, 2020, p. 1). Leaked CCP documents reveal that President Xi Jinping, widely regarded as the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao Zedong (Economy, 2018, pp. 11–22), ordered CCP officials to exploit the “organs of dictatorship” to show “absolutely no mercy” in the Chinese state's struggle against the “Three Evils” of terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism (Millward, 2019).

President Xi's preferred policy, which by virtue of China's centralized leadership structure has become national policy, is cultural destruction. Xi's “Chinese Dream” policy, as written into the party's constitution in 2017, hopes to spark “the communal consciousness of the Chinese nation.” Forced assimilation of Uyghurs is seen by the nation's leadership as a way to promote the “revival of the great Chinese people/nation” (Ownby, 2018). Xi's penchant for coercion is based on his view that economic development is not enough to transform the ethnic frontier, secure CCP rule, and achieve the China Dream (Leibold & Verjee, 2021).

Despite ample evidence of the violence directed against Uyghurs,² public choice scholars have attended only modestly to the problem of violent cultural assimilation in China. We suggest that public choice is especially useful for explaining what Bednar and Page (2018) identify as the two broad approaches to cultural change: nonviolent incentives or coercion. In China's case, our analysis considers explicitly three significant questions involving cultural change. Why did the government choose violent assimilation despite the extensive public costs of implementation? Why did the government choose to implement especially harsh policies only in 2017, even though sporadic violent incidents had occurred in Xinjiang over the past 20 years? Why did the CCP choose the latter option rather than simply allowing trade and economic growth to facilitate cultural integration?

Informed by public choice analysis, we highlight three key changes that contributed to the choice of violent assimilation. The first is the substantial centralization of political power by President Xi. Second, advances in security and surveillance technology created an unprecedented ability to monitor citizens' activities. Third, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments elevated the economic significance of the region. The increase in marginal benefits from predation, when balanced against the costs of carrying out repressive campaigns, created a rational interest in violent cultural assimilation.

¹ While most detained individuals are Uyghurs, other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang (including Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Hui) have been subject to unlawful detention as well.

² See, for example, Rajagopalan (2017), Roberts (2020), and Zenz (2018b, 2019b, c).

Our paper contributes to three literatures. First, our analysis highlights the relationship between rising state capacity, economic growth, and violent cultural assimilation campaigns. Johnson and Koyama (2019) argue that the path to modern liberal states was blazed by investment in both fiscal and legal capacity. The modern state, through its greater ability to collect taxes and effectively administer the law, can contribute to prosperity (Johnson & Koyama, 2017). According to Johnson and Koyama (2019, p. 3), two self-reinforcing equilibriums are possible: stronger states choose to enforce more costly general rules (requiring investment in institutions supporting the rule of law), while weaker states enforce cheaper identity rules (rules whose form and enforcement depend upon the social identity of the relevant parties, including religion, race, or language).³

We emphasize that modern China fits neither of those two self-reinforcing equilibriums. The institutional bundle of the modern People's Republic of China (PRC) has permitted high growth alongside persistent predation along identitarian lines.⁴ We argue that predation along identitarian lines is possible in any high-capacity state, especially one in which the rule of law is questionable. Though the property rights literature recognizes selective enforcement of property rights, whereby property protection is provided to some and growth results in the economy overall (see, for example, Albertus, 2021; Haber et al., 2003; Holland, 2017), the state capacity perspective has focused more on the rule of law as a public good, as opposed to a good provided selectively to some at others expense.

Second, we provide additional support for the predatory theory of the state. Whereas the contractarian vision views state predation as a means of promoting protection (Buchanan, 1975), the predatory vision of the state understands protection only as a means for the state to promote its predation, including through conquest (Tullock, 1974, 1987). In the predatory view, the key actors comprising “the state”, including politicians, the military, and bureaucrats (Vahabi, 2020), are motivated primarily by the desire to acquire revenue and to gain control of land and labor, often after some form of group conflict (Scott, 2017; Vahabi, 2004). Central to that vision of the state is competitive rent extraction (Leeson, 2007; Leeson & Williamson, 2009; Piano, 2019; Vahabi, 2020). The scope of the state is determined by political decision makers' ability to appropriate assets and how well individuals can avoid predation, such as by hiding their assets or activities (Vahabi, 2016). Public predation is a byproduct of society's failure to impose credible constraints on state actors' violence and discretionary power (Boettke & Candela, 2020; Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili, 2020). Absent such constraints, state actors arbitrarily prey upon citizens, who thereby become subject to both material and physical insecurity (Kuran, 2020).

Our analysis of China's policies illustrates how increases in state capacity expand the feasible set of predatory actions that can be undertaken by political decision makers rather than contributing to a more efficient provision of public goods. By weakening constraints on rule, President Xi's policies created opportunities for predation, although as we explain, Xi's incentives to invest in cultural destruction require consideration of the perceived value of Xinjiang in the BRI, as well as technologies that lowered the cost to the government of mass surveillance.

³ Buchanan and Congleton (1998, pp. 11–13) argue that a system characterized by general rules is more efficient relative to a system that introduces inequality. This is because the latter system requires more resources to make fine distinctions in the application of law across individual cases.

⁴ Johnson and Koyama (2019, pp. 285–287) make clear that the rise of the modern state did not make religious freedom inevitable. “Power states”, or high-capacity states enforcing identity rules, such as Nazi Germany and contemporary China, serve as obvious exceptions.

As for our third contribution, China's Xinjiang policies illustrate the value of considering the relationship between nation-building and homogenization. Large, heterogeneous nations enjoy both the benefits of a large populace (for example, economies of scale and lower per capita costs of public goods) and face the costs of a heterogeneous populace (for example, ethnic conflict and social disharmony) (Alesina & Spolaore, 1997; Alesina et al., 2003). Alesina et al., (2013, 2017) argue that states deploy technologies—ranging from compulsory language instruction and patriotic education to deportations and massacres—to homogenize a populace along some identarian margin, such as ethnicity or religious affiliation. Democracies and dictatorships face different incentives for deploying homogenization technologies; the threat of democratization gives states the strongest incentive to homogenize. In a dictatorship, if deploying a homogenization technology is less expensive than providing public goods, the state will set out to homogenize the populace. China's Xinjiang policies represent a case in which changes in homogenization technology enabled a much more violent assimilation campaign than previous oppressive state policies regarding the Uyghurs.

2 Xinjiang: A brief historical background

Bordering eight Central and South Asian countries, the Xinjiang (meaning “New Frontier”) region has long been a complex area of cultural interaction, conquest, and controversy. Representing one-sixth of China's overall land area, Xinjiang is China's largest province and home to the country's largest oil and mineral reserves. The development and control of Xinjiang have long been a priority of the central government. While Mao Zedong declared the region the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955 to win over the region's Turkic Muslim populace, in reality, the administration there has never been Uyghur or truly autonomous (Starr, 2004, pp. 3–6).

In the two decades following the reform period of Deng Xiaoping, parts of Xinjiang experienced rapid economic development, with the capital, Urumqi, becoming one of the largest cities in Central Asia with nearly three million inhabitants. However, economic growth in Xinjiang disproportionately has benefited the growing Han Chinese populace, many of whom were incentivized by the CCP to migrate westward to Xinjiang with promises of jobs and housing. Meanwhile, southern Xinjiang (the Uyghurs' traditional heartland) has experienced relatively little economic growth (Harlan, 2009). Whereas in 1945 Han and Uyghurs made up 6.2% and 82.7% of Xinjiang's population, by 2017 Han accounted for 36% and Uyghurs 48% (Liu & Peters, 2017). The mass movement of Han people to Xinjiang, a key contributor to ethnic tension and weakening loyalty toward China, has led some commentators to view officially supported Han migration as Beijing's primary policy tool for assimilating its border regions (Odgaard & Nielsen, 2014).

For decades, Xinjiang has been the site of a protracted struggle for greater autonomy between the region's Turkic Muslim population and the regional and central governments (Starr, 2004). After a series of Uyghur-Han clashes in the 1990s, the Chinese authorities moved to assert tighter control over the Uyghurs. In response to outbreaks of opposition and unrest, the government cracked down on “illegal religious activities” and separatism (Li, 2019, pp. 334–335). The fortunes of the Uyghur populace significantly worsened in the early 2000s. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Beijing opportunistically claimed that it confronted its own domestic struggle against the spread of radical Islam. After the Chinese government persuaded the US government to condemn a minor splinter faction of the

Uyghur nationalist movement as a terrorist group within China, the government in effect had carte blanche to designate minor Uyghur independence movements as terrorist campaigns. Those efforts became a part of the CCP's plan to combat the Three Evils of separatism, religious extremism, and international terrorism at all costs (Fuller et al. 2004, pp. 340–344).

Negative sentiments toward the Uyghurs intensified after the protests of July 5–7, 2009, in Urumqi. What began as peaceful demonstrations became “one of the worst episodes of ethnic violence in China in decades”, as deadly violence broke out between Uyghurs and Han in the streets of Urumqi.⁵ In the weeks following, Chinese law enforcement authorities “carried out a widespread campaign of unlawful arrests in the Uyghur areas of Urumqi; at least dozens, and possibly many more, detainees... disappeared” (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 21). The Urumqi riots marked a turning point whereby the CCP would come to suspect the entire Uyghur ethnic group, rather than individual perpetrators, of being potential radical Islamists.

As the years passed, Xinjiang experienced a trend of steadily increasing security and surveillance by the Chinese government and a handful of deadly attacks by Uyghurs. Zenz and Leibold (2017a, b) argue that a series of high-profile terror attacks outside of Xinjiang, such as a knife attack that killed 31 people at a railway station in Kunming in March 2014, “seriously unnerved the Chinese populace and prompted the central government to take an even tougher stance.” After a May 2014 bombing of a market in Urumqi left 43 dead and more than 90 injured, Xi announced a nationwide “Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism”, which lowered the threshold for arresting and punishing Uyghurs dramatically (Wang, 2018). This “iron-fist strategy”—conveying a message of zero tolerance for crimes deemed to “threaten the sovereignty of the state”—has been accompanied by speedy trials and harsh sentences, with over 50 Uyghurs being sentenced to death in recent years (Li, 2019, pp. 335–37).

The scale and scope of state-sponsored discrimination against the Uyghurs reached unprecedented levels in 2017 under the leadership of Chen Quanguo, party secretary for XUAR since August 2016. Previously, the party secretary of Tibet Autonomous Region from 2011 to 2016, Chen became known for his relentless mobilization of the state security apparatus to suppress any perceived destabilizing influences. Upon arriving in Xinjiang, Chen distributed President Xi's speeches widely and exhorted officials to “round up everyone who should be rounded up” (Ramzy & Buckley, 2019). Chen's mass-internment strategy in Xinjiang accomplished “in a single year what took him five years in [Tibet]” (Zenz & Leibold, 2017a). In 2017, Urumqi's official population fell by 15%—from 2.6 million the year before to 2.2 million—the first decline in more than three decades. What is most important, May 2017 was the month that police began rounding up Urumqi's Uyghur populace and taking them to detention camps (Chin & Bürge, 2019).

In the years since the Chen-initiated campaign began, detained individuals have been subjected to involuntary internment in political reeducation camps and “vocational training centers”, a euphemism for forced-labor camps. The changes in Xinjiang are such that virtually no part of Uyghur private life lies beyond the reach of the state. Such methods, as Greer (2018) writes, “are straight from the dystopian imagination”, including the mass

⁵ The Chinese government places the Urumqi death toll at 197 people (134 Han Chinese and only 10 Uyghurs) with more than 1600 injured. International observers dispute those numbers, claiming that 400 Uyghurs were killed in Urumqi, plus an additional 100 in Kashgar (Human Rights Watch 2009, pp. 11–13).

collection of DNA and voice samples and a flood of CCTV cameras connected to police databases that monitor Uyghurs' homes, provincial streets, and marketplaces. In addition to continuous technological surveillance, Uyghurs now must tolerate "big brothers and sisters" in their homes to monitor their words, actions, and associations. From 2014 to 2016, more than 300,000 Communist Party members were sent to Xinjiang as monitors under the banner "Visit the People, Benefit the People, and Bring Together the Hearts of the People". An additional one million monitors were sent in 2017 to guide Uyghurs through study sessions on President Xi's vision of New China and compulsory patriotic singing in front of the local CCP headquarters (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020, pp. 235–236).

Recently, it has become known that over the 2015–2018 period, the Uyghur birth rate fell by more than 60%. That news, confirmed by the Chinese government, came alongside numerous reports of Uyghur women being subjected to forced sterilizations, abortions, and IUD insertions within the internment camps (Zenz, 2020). Many analyses of the events in Xinjiang have described them as "cultural genocide" (The Economist, 2020) aimed at eliminating Uyghur cultural practices. However, following revelation of the dramatically reduced Uyghur birth rate, the qualifier "cultural" increasingly is being dropped (Finley, 2020).⁶

3 Homogenization through coercive assimilation

In this section, we consider the question of why autocrats invest in violent cultural assimilation policies. The economic analysis of that question has focused on the benefits and costs of homogeneity. As Alesina and Spolaore (1997, pp. 1028–1029) point out, large, heterogeneous countries enjoy benefits (for example, a lower per capita cost of public goods, economies of scale) and bear costs (for example, disharmony or larger cultural-preference distances between individuals, on average). Ethnic conflict resulting from heterogeneity is an important determinant of the political economy—particularly, political stability and institutional quality—of nations and localities (Alesina et al., 2003). Alesina et al., (2013, 2017) link those benefits and costs to assimilation campaigns by arguing that authoritarian states faced with internal threats have incentives to deploy homogenization technologies to regiment a populace along some identarian margin, such as a political belief, religious affiliation, or ethnic composition.

While the costs of heterogeneity may be to some extent mitigated by dividing a large country into autonomous regions (Alesina & Spolaore, 1997, p. 1046), greater regional autonomy may encourage ethnic revival, thereby lowering the perceived costs of separatist activities (Sun, 2020; Treisman, 1997). As such, states have incentives to deploy policies that alter the cost–benefit calculations of separatists (Young, 1994). Along the same lines, Alesina et al., (2013, p. 3) predict more investment in nation-building within threatened non-democratic regimes relative to nonthreatened dictatorships or democracies.⁷ As Tull-ock (1974, p. 58) put it, for the autocrat, "repression is cheaper than reform".

⁶ For a counterargument—that the genocide label is unwarranted—see Sachs and Schabas (2021).

⁷ Alesina et al., (2013, pp. 2–6) define nation building as "a process which leads to the formation of countries in which the citizens feel a sufficient amount of commonality of interests, goals, and preferences that they do not wish to separate from each other." Nation building may take on both productive forms (e.g., building highways) and odious forms (e.g., prohibiting the use of a native language; committing genocide).

In dictatorships, if deploying the homogenization technology is less expensive than providing public goods, homogenization permits officials in power to better maintain their preferred set of policies in the face of uncertainty and political instability. Accordingly, “rulers threatened by overthrow will indoctrinate people in order to teach them to ‘enjoy’ the current regime and the current borders of the country and not break away...” (Alesina et al., 2013, p. 3). Such actions, if successful, alter the perceived costs and benefits of resistance to the regime so as to lower its value. Despite the relatively high costs, rational autocrats have incentives to undertake homogenization techniques, even if they are only marginally effective (Barzel, 1997, p. 138).

In Xinjiang, CCP decision makers have implemented policies along those very lines. By decision makers, we refer here to politicians and bureaucrats within the CCP with imperfect collective enforcement powers, as opposed to a single entity imposing its will uniformly through coercion (Libecap, 1989). While President Xi and party secretary Chen Quanguo are powerful decision nodes, when we consider the benefits and costs facing CCP decision makers, we are referring to CCP officials at various levels of government connected to the Xinjiang policies. The repressive policies are investments in a coherent governance system throughout China—a country with similar state and fiscal capacity within its borders, rather than one with high state capacity in the East and low state capacity in the West. Although lower-level CCP decision-makers may not have much of an interest in such investments, the centralized aspects of the CCP ensure that they will care about it because President Xi does. Such actions demonstrate the commitment of the CCP, led by Xi, to renew the “New China era”, Xi’s favored term for China under Mao. Mao was known for his insistence that the party and the state have a strong presence throughout the country, thereby ensuring that the only means of political participation was through the CCP (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020, p. 229).

As McGuire and Olson (1996, p. 73) point out, whether coercion is utilized in the interaction between two parties depends on how those parties differ in wealth, power, or other ways. Barzel (2002) recognized that collective action is necessary to limit state predation, a problem that becomes all the more severe as populations increase. On the other side of the coin, a larger and more complex society implies—particularly for an autocratic regime—innovations in the realm of institutional destruction to come from the top to preserve power. Contrary to Hirshleifer’s (1991) paradox of power, which holds that smaller players tend to improve their positions relative to larger ones, CCP decision-makers have wielded coercive force to serve their interests at maintaining power against an already subjugated group. Over the last decade, the CCP has desired “the reassertion of total party dominance” over society (Palmer, 2017), and harmonization of the PRC’s twenty first-century institutions with the CCP’s Maoist ideological heritage has been a core goal of governance under Xi (Greer, 2019). Xi desires to achieve what Mao was unable to achieve: a prosperous and powerful China.

Under China’s predatory capitalism, the Chinese state preserves the rights of some by enabling market processes but will degrade those rights (and the wealth associated with market exchange) quickly should it see fit (Cai et al., 2020). In doing so, the state constrains wealth creation, especially by closing off interactions among people of different ethnic groups (Kuran, 2011, 2013). Through its policy choices, the CCP promotes the private interests of dominant groups within the state, including politicians, the military, and bureaucrats (Vahabi, 2020).

Uyghurs have long been excluded from Xinjiang’s most lucrative markets, especially the energy and industrial sectors (Pannell & Schmidt, 2006). A primary example of that exclusion is the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), a paramilitary unit

created in 1954 to foster state-sponsored flows of Han Chinese into Xinjiang. The majority of the XPCC's massive workforce—upward of 2.6 million as of 2020, accounting for more than 17% of Xinjiang's GDP—consists of (Han) retired soldiers of the People's Liberation Army (Howell & Fan, 2011). Although ethnic minorities comprise a small majority of Xinjiang's populace, only 13.9% of the XPCC's workforce are Uyghurs or other minorities. While Beijing claims that the XPCC is “not competing for benefits with the local people”, many Uyghurs resent what they consider to be the blatant appropriation of their land and water resources (Olesen, 2014). The CCP's approach to state-building involves destructive cultural coordination, a tactic emphasized in the predatory vision of the state.

While some tension arises between the wealth-constraining nature of Chinese capitalism and the promotion of the private interests of dominant groups within society, the very nature of the constraints (here, governmental granting of monopoly privileges in the energy industry in Xinjiang) permits the state to funnel resources to groups privileged by the state, here, ex-military members employed by the XPCC. It is within that institutional setting that we analyze the CCP's coercive assimilatory policies.

4 Changing constraints and incentives

4.1 Political centralization under Xi

The core of our argument is that the CCP's decision makers implementing the coercive assimilatory policies in Xinjiang responded to changes in the relative payoffs and costs associated with those policies. CCP decision makers perceived that the benefits resulting from such policies (for example, achieving Xi's China Dream, a coherent nation-state, or greater stability) outweighed the costs of such policies.⁸

In our theory, political centralization within the CCP under President Xi Jinping lowered the political transaction costs associated with implementing repression. Since assuming power in 2013, the CCP's leadership under Xi has moved dramatically away from the “collective leadership” of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, opting instead for “core leadership” and consolidated decision-making power (Thomas, 2020). In 2017, Xi abolished presidential term limits, opening the possibility that he will rule for life (Maçães, 2019, p. 174); in 2018, “Xi Jinping Thought” was enshrined in the CCP Constitution, something done previously only for Mao (Economy, 2018, p. 18). While Xi's rise partially is a byproduct of his own political acumen, mounting evidence suggests that his rise and consolidation of power may be at least as much the result of a consensus among China's ruling elite that the regime was in crisis and in need of a strongman at the helm (Baranovitch, 2021; Thomas, 2021). Whereas China was about “getting up” in the Mao era and “getting rich” in the Deng era, China in the Xi era is about “becoming strong” (Jiang, 2018).

Under the consolidated leadership of Xi, CCP decision makers faced lower political transaction costs for engaging in a large-scale coercive assimilatory campaign—including the application of new technologies of predation—relative to a less consolidated regime. Regardless of CCP officials' personal views on the efficacy of such a campaign, the political environment has both raised the benefits of supporting Xi's preferred policies and

⁸ The CCP's stated justifications for the coercive policies include alleviating poverty and achieving economic growth in Xinjiang (Zenz, 2019a).

raised the costs of resisting his policy direction. Increasingly, the picture emerging is one of the power dynamics tilting further and further away from local government and toward Beijing (Thomas, 2020). Power centralization explains the meteoric rise of Chen Quanguo, who was noticed by Xi for his stability-enhancing policies in Tibet. Chen was among the first of the senior CCP officials to speak of Xi as the “core” of CCP leadership (Zenz & Leibold, 2017a). Because of his total loyalty to Xi, Chen was rewarded with a seat on the all-powerful CCP Politburo in 2017 (Zenz & Leibold, 2017a).

Given the consolidation under Xi, who has firm political power over the party, the state, and the military, high-ranking officials and bureaucrats have stronger incentives to align with policies implemented from the top. Some evidence even suggests that the Xi regime enjoys wide support among party elites. As Thomas (2021) points out, Xi has enjoyed rising approval rates at the National People’s Congress (NPC). While the NPC is widely (and accurately) regarded as a rubberstamp congress, Xi’s predecessor, Hu Jintao, saw his approval rate fall from 91.2% in 2007 to 85.3% in 2013. In contrast, Xi’s approval within the NPC has risen each year since taking power, increasing from 90.5% in 2014 to 98.5% in 2020. The extent to which those figures reflect genuine support, as opposed to fear of political retribution, is unknown. Nonetheless, Xi’s power advantage over previous leaders is clear.

Looking at CCP expenditures, we can see the effects of centralization of power, as Xi’s aim to exploit the “organs of dictatorship” in the CCP’s coercive assimilation of Xinjiang is plain in China’s security budgets. During the first five years of Xi’s leadership, China’s domestic security spending grew 30% faster than total government spending (Zenz, 2018b). Examining CCP spending data, Zenz (2018a, p. 6) points out that in 2010, China’s national domestic security spending exceeded its external-defense spending for the first time. By 2016, a gap of 135 had arisen, as domestic security spending increased by nearly 18% that year in conjunction with the Xinjiang policy.

Over the course of one year (2016 to 2017), Xinjiang’s security spending nearly doubled, increasing from 30.05 billion yuan (USD 4.3 billion) to 57.95 billion yuan (USD 8.4 billion) (Zenz, 2018b). In comparison, Xinjiang’s security spending was 5.45 billion yuan in 2007 (USD 780 million), meaning that in only a decade, the province’s security spending rose tenfold (Dou & Wen, 2020; Zenz, 2018a). As Zenz (2018b) points out, security spending in Xinjiang between 2016 and 2017 increased most dramatically in minority-dominated prefectures within Xinjiang (167%) compared with the region of Xinjiang as a whole (92%). From 2016 to 2017, Xinjiang’s domestic security budget increased in each of the following categories: all security-related facility construction (213%); social-stability management (235%); detention-center management (239%); and other domestic security expenditures (351%). Those figures are much higher still for Xinjiang’s ethnic-minority prefectures and counties. While China’s security spending has increased in general, the increase is much more pronounced in Xinjiang, particularly so within minority-dominated prefectures.

Since 2017, more than 200 detention compounds have been built in Xinjiang (Rajagopalan et al., 2020). Satellite imagery reveals that from April 2017 to August 2018, 39 camps nearly tripled in size, with the additional area amounting to the equivalent of 140 soccer fields (Wen & Auyezov, 2018). Despite the government’s 2020 announcement that almost all individuals in its “vocational training program” had “graduated”, new satellite evidence shows that, from 2019 to 2020, more than 60 prisonlike detention centers either have been expanded or built from scratch (Fifield, 2020).

Homogenizing a populace of millions through constant monitoring, reeducation, and forced labor entails considerable political coordination and massive investment in

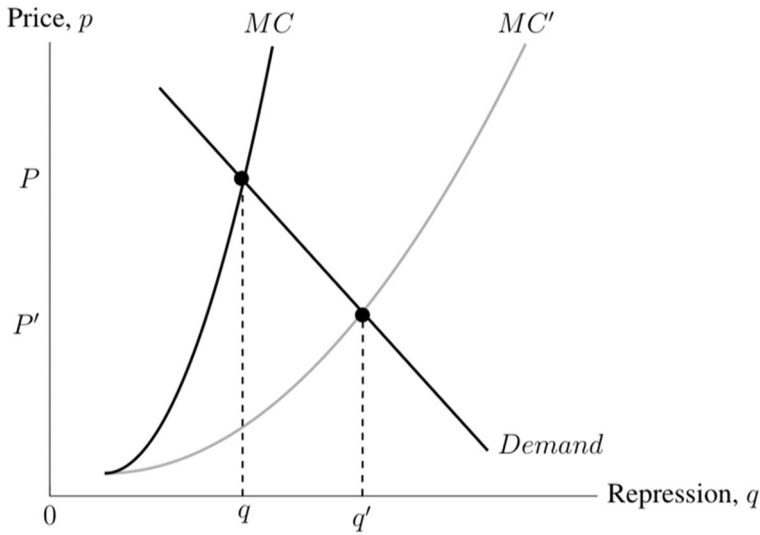


Fig. 1 Equilibrium repression

security-related spending. Because of the consolidated political power presently wielded by Xi, CCP decision-makers faced lower political transaction costs associated with a drastic shift in policy toward coercive assimilation relative to an alternative scenario without such political consolidation. In an atmosphere of consolidated political power, state actors have stronger incentives to align themselves with the leader's policy choices and are disincentivized from disputing them.

4.2 Technological change

Technological change plays a key role in explaining the growth of the state (Cowen, 2009). Large institutional structures require extensive communication, organization, and coordination; technological change pushes out the feasible set of what states can accomplish. Developments in transportation, communication, tax collecting, information management, and other technologies all contribute to tighter population control, a hallmark of the Chinese surveillance state. As Wagner's law shows, wealthier societies tend to demand more government services (Peacock & Scott, 2000). Likewise, wealthier governments are able to embark upon larger and more systematic projects and campaigns. Central to understanding the CCP's Xinjiang policies—and the shift from an old political equilibrium to a new one—are the technological changes that made them possible (Cowen, 2009, p. 20).

While technological change may be endogenous, it also can arise exogenously, as the literature on the rise of military capacity reveals. The latter explanation is especially so when the government does not have to invest in the development of the technology, as is the case in Xinjiang with artificial intelligence and security technologies that have been deployed widely.⁹ Developed in the west, such technologies have become cheaply

⁹ Surveillance technology, including AI and DNA identification, developed by US companies, have assisted the CCP's repressive efforts in Xinjiang (Chin & Lin, 2019; Wee, 2021). Recent events in Afghanistan reflect tell the same story, as one headline reads, "US-built databases a potential tool of Taliban repression" (Bajak, 2021).

available to governments desirous to use them. Offering a similar explanation, Anderson and McChesney (1994) contend that the reason why the federal government chose war over treaties with American Indians was that the former's costs declined after the Civil War once the US government had a permanent standing army. When technological changes arise exogenously, the net benefits may shift in ways that favor repression, even without government investment in such technology. In such instances, a free hand to implement policies becomes a critical determinant of policy.

Vast exogenous technological change thus expanded the CCP's predation possibilities, lowering the marginal costs of repression. Here, the predatory vision of the state understands that to the extent the state provides protection, it does so as only a means for promoting its predatory behavior. Protection and predation are two sides of the same coin for the predatory state, as predators turn into protectors only when providing protection generates sufficient rents (Vahabi, 2020). For the modern PRC, rising security expenditures expand the feasible set of predatory actions that can be undertaken by political decision makers.

Figure 1 depicts an exogenous technological shock that lowers the marginal costs of repression, which the CCP responded to by increasing the quantity demanded of repressive tactics. The increase in marginal benefits from predation, when balanced against the costs of carrying out repressive campaigns, created a rational interest in violent cultural assimilation. Given their revealed heightened demand for repressive methods, CCP decision-makers increased the quantity demanded of repression in response to lower marginal costs. Assessing whether the demand- or supply-side effect dominated is outside the bounds of our analysis; hence, Fig. 1 depicts one demand curve rather than two.

For the Chinese government, those investments represent an increase in surveillance along the margins of quantity (for example, hiring more traditional police officers) and quality (for example, the deployment of cutting-edge surveillance technology). Within the predatory-state framework, the boundaries of the state are determined endogenously by the extent to which it can capture rent-generating assets. Assets may refer to things such as knowledge and skills (generally non-appropriable, and thereby not within reach of the state, or the "state space"), as well as commodities, money, and physical capital (appropriable, and ambivalent with respect to the state space). Specifically, the "booty value of assets" refers to the amount of an asset's value that can be transferred or allocated through coercive capture (Vahabi, 2016, p. 154). The predatory state will seize assets for itself if it can strengthen its ability to appropriate assets or weaken the potential mobility of assets.

The repressive policies in Xinjiang have been characterized by the CCP's dramatically enhanced asset-appropriation capabilities. Investment by the Chinese government in some of the world's top surveillance technologies has made it such that Xinjiang has been labeled "a twenty-first century Police State... [combining] dystopian technology and human policing" (Rajagopalan, 2017). A small sample of the technological surveillance deployed includes the mass collection of DNA samples, iris scans, voice samples, regular scans of digital devices, the use of digital ID cards to track movements, and a flood of CCTV cameras connected to police databases that monitor Uyghurs' homes, provincial streets, and marketplaces (Greer, 2018). With virtually no part of Uyghur life beyond the reach of the state, the enhanced surveillance efforts engaged in by the CCP represent an investment in the monitoring (and therefore maintenance) of the human-specific assets of the Uyghur populace, which the government aims to "Sinicize".

A large fraction of those funds were designated for creating over 90,000 new police and security-related positions in Xinjiang in 2017 (Zenz & Leibold, 2017b) and constructing more than 7500 "convenience police stations" around the region, which "made it easy for police to monitor local residents and mobilize rapidly in response to threats" (Dou &

Wen, 2020). Street corners in Xinjiang have the feel of being under military occupation, as thousands of paramilitary troops parade through Xinjiang's cities "in shows of 'thunderous power' aimed at Uyghur terrorists" (The Economist, 2017). That is the key to what CCP officials call "grid-style social management", a strategy that segments communities into geometric zones so that security staff (with a vast network of CCTV cameras connected to police databases) can observe much more citizen activity than ever before (Zenz & Leibold, 2017b). A leaked document quoting Chen Quanguo stated that the reeducation camps should "teach like a school, be managed like the military, and be defended like a prison" (Dooley 2018). Uyghurs remain in tightly state-controlled environments not merely while detained in reeducation camps, but throughout their everyday lives. Having undertaken extensive investment in asset appropriability, the CCP has secured economies of scale in the surveillance of the Uyghur populace, specifically monitoring the extent to which their human-specific assets (that is, knowledge, sentiments, skills) are being used in CCP-sanctioned manners. The surveillance state's apparatus includes monitoring all online activities, as well as the installation of 200 million facial-recognition cameras throughout the PRC (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020, p. 235).

The approach undertaken by the CCP in Xinjiang has involved shifting away from targeting individuals' behavior in favor of targeting groups based on the often-immutable characteristics of people. Individual punishments for offensive activities have been replaced by group detention, reeducation, and forced labor (Greitens et al., 2020, p. 11). Interviews with detainees reveal the existence of nearly 50 infractions (ranging from owning multiple knives to consuming alcohol, to having WhatsApp downloaded, to attending a traditional Islamic funeral) that are considered sufficient to justify indefinite detention without due process (Greer, 2018). In the PRC, uncertainty among citizens as to whether such infractions are "official policy" or ad hoc decisions by local officials is a feature, not a bug.

Advances in surveillance technology have enabled the CCP to define and enforce a set of legal rights—along identitarian lines—to homogenize the populace and in the process pursue Xi's core ambition of realizing the China Dream: the building a coherent nation-state with a consistent level of state and fiscal capacity from east to west. Doing so involves the delineation and enforcement of a set of legal rights (Barzel, 2000), which itself is costly and subject to the state's budget constraint. Here, Chinese authorities are enforcing stricter identity rules that undermine the economic rights of the Uyghurs further. Thus, the state's choice of a governance bundle is a function of the technology available to it, among other factors. Investment in the realignment of political allegiances is an example of a way in which the Chinese predatory state seeks to raise the booty value of human-specific assets—the knowledge, sentiments, and skillsets of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Fundamentally, CCP decision makers view the net benefits of degrading the property rights and culture of Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang as greater than the costs. Accordingly, the policies are efficient from the government's predatory perspective.

4.3 Belt and Road Initiative

Coinciding with the repression of the Uyghurs is the Belt and Road Initiative, China's signature transcontinental investment project and policy.¹⁰ Notably, an immense volume of

¹⁰ Spanning 130+ countries since its 2013 inception, BRI comprises massive investments in infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications projects (Hillman, 2020).

BRI investment occurs in or is adjacent to Xinjiang. Pakistan, for instance, is the location of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, which has been referred to as the crown jewel of BRI. Another central node of BRI investment is Kazakhstan, particularly the Khorgos dry port on the border of China and Kazakhstan, the biggest dry port in the world. With billions of dollars invested in those two locales, China aims for Kazakhstan to serve as the gateway to Europe and for Pakistan to be the gateway to the Indian Ocean (Mações, 2019, p. 43).

Given the extent of Chinese investment in Central Asia, along with the proximity of the recipient countries to Xinjiang, some observers have sought to tie BRI to the policies repressing the Uyghurs (Kam, 2018). As Zenz (2019c, p. 103) points out, the inception of BRI in 2013 coincided with a period in which deadly acts of resistance in Xinjiang (and elsewhere in China) were reaching a peak. While BRI is not a response to the CCP's perception of problems existing in Xinjiang, the violence there amplified the value of maintaining stability in the region more than it would have in a context without BRI investment. By virtue of the CCP's repression through forced labor, BRI is reflective of the repression of the Uyghurs.

With BRI, China places a premium on heightened coordination of the Chinese economy, particularly in Xinjiang. The value of Xinjiang's land and labor resources as perceived by CCP decision makers determines the marginal benefits from repression and, with the onset of BRI, the incentives for stability were strengthened in the region. Along with reduced political transaction costs from consolidating power under President Xi and lower marginal costs of repression from an exogenous technological shock, BRI also contributed to CCP decision makers choosing repressive policies.

To the extent that Chinese state-owned creditors can capture returns from BRI projects, incentives are created for shoring up the locales where projects are taking place. CCP decision makers—most saliently Xi Jinping—believe that a considerable threat to political stability exists in Xinjiang. Conditional upon that belief, investing in security and stabilization is a way of internalizing an externality. While the credibility of the security threat appears dubious at best, leaked CCP documents nonetheless indicate that it looms large to Xi (Greitens et al., 2020, pp. 11–12; Ramzy & Buckley, 2019). While the CCP maintains that the mass detentions are part of a campaign to combat terrorism in the region, the sheer scale of the campaign suggests that the party has larger goals. As Chin and Bürge (2019) argue, “The party's goal... is to reinforce its control in Xinjiang by remaking the long recalcitrant region in its own image, and to secure it as a hub for President Xi Jinping's global development ambitions.” Given the billions of dollars of BRI investment running through and adjacent to Xinjiang, CCP decision makers have acted to secure those investments by deploying homogenization technologies in the region.

By way of comparison, the CCP engaged in a repressive campaign in Tibet following unrest in 2008–2009. While the repression of Tibetans likewise involved reeducation and involuntary vocational training, the campaign operated on a scale nowhere close to that in Xinjiang. Besides the difference in scale, the Tibetan case lacked indefinite extrajudicial internment along the lines of what's occurring in Xinjiang (Greitens et al., 2020; Odgaard & Nielsen, 2014). As Zhu and Blachford (2012) point out, “Tibet lacks industry potential and extractable natural resources, so its economic importance for China's market-oriented economic reforms is less evident.” State-led development projects in Tibet, in contrast to those in Xinjiang, are described as “being highly subsidy dependent and inefficient” (Ertürk, 2016). Given the perception that economic prospects in Xinjiang are stronger than in Tibet, CCP decision makers have responded to incentives by investing in security-related spending in Xinjiang in support of BRI investment projects on a much larger scale. While

both provinces are mountainous, nearly all of Tibet's border is taken up by the Himalayas. Geography imposes a natural constraint on exchange opportunities, limiting the extent to which the CCP invests in the region. For those reasons—and in contrast to Xinjiang—Tibet is neither adjacent nor central to critical BRI investment projects.

Another point suggesting that CCP decision makers have economic considerations in mind with the repression in Xinjiang is the usage of so-called vocational training internment camps (VTICs) (Zenz, 2019a). Through VTICs, the CCP coercively provides vocational training for Uyghurs, many of whom were engaged previously in agricultural work or other traditional Uyghur crafts in southern Xinjiang. For the CCP, the combination of reeducation and forced labor serves to transform a “backward” religious minority into modern, “useful” citizens. As detained citizens learn “higher value” skills (for example, assembly-line work), the state simultaneously is able to monitor, indoctrinate, and retrain Uyghurs (Zenz, 2019a). VTICs intensify longstanding programs aimed at transforming Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities from poor, rural workers to factory workers or commercial-farm workers (Wong & Buckley, 2021).

New exchange opportunities associated with BRI investments in Central Asia created a source of demand for cheap, low-skill labor and, in turn, increased the demand for forced labor. With no constraints on state action, the benefits associated with degrading Uyghur autonomy, in the eyes of CCP decision makers, increased. From the perspective of state decision makers perceiving a security threat, destroying wealth—in this case, the free exchange opportunities of Uyghurs in Xinjiang—is a rational means of protecting their investments (Leeson & Harris, 2018).

5 Conclusion

China's Xinjiang policy demonstrates that the actions of predatory states determine asset appropriability endogenously. A retroactive change to China's laws in 2018, enacted in order to promote “transformation through education”, legalized the indefinite detention of more than one million Uyghurs for violating counterterrorism regulations—a potent example of the Chinese government's discriminatory property rights regime (Dou, 2018). Similarly, Germany's fascist state robbed Jews by promoting “Aryanization of the economy”, which prepared the way for the legal confiscation of Jewish property and assets by the state (Dean, 2008).

The predatory theory of the state provides insight into why governments choose violent cultural assimilation. The repressive actions undertaken by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang can be understood through the lens of the changing constraints and incentives facing CCP decision makers. Consolidated political power within the CCP, technological advances in security and surveillance, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects altered the CCP's cost–benefit analysis of coercive assimilatory policies in Xinjiang. For a Despot Leviathan, predation and investment in state capacity are both complementary and self-reinforcing: enhanced state capacity enables enhanced predation, and enhanced predation enables greater state capacity. With enhanced predatory capabilities, the CCP's surveillance state can nearly constantly monitor the citizenry, thereby increasing the state's legal capacity and moving toward Xi's goal of a coherent governance core across the whole of China. As Geloso and Salter (2020) explain, investments in state capacity imply investment in coercive capacity. State capacity thus is an outcome of a process involving both plunder and the prevention of plunder. The development

of the People's Republic of China illustrates how state capacity and coercive capacity are linked.¹¹

Related research highlights counterterrorism as the primary factor explaining the policies implemented in Xinjiang. Greitens et al. (2020), for example, emphasize that the CCP shifted policy from “stability maintenance” to “preventive repression” because of its leadership's access to new intelligence, which caused them to revise their beliefs regarding the terror threat in Xinjiang. “New intelligence” offers a partial explanation but leaves open the question of why policy shifted when it did. Xinjiang experienced sporadic instances of violence in the 1990s and 2000s, most of which were incidents of civil unrest that began as protests. Throughout that period, the CCP retained a dominant position over its citizens, even in the less developed western provinces. Despite the ostensible security threat, previous CCP responses were nowhere near the scale of the ongoing Strike Hard Campaign. In addition, the CCP could have made an example of a few offenders rather than spending billions of dollars per year on constructing detention facilities, reeducating large swathes of the populace, and providing forced vocational training. Accounts emphasizing counterterrorism as the primary factor explaining the Xinjiang policies understate the benefits that flow to CCP decision makers from promoting and implementing repressive policies, as well as the technological changes that enabled it.

From our own experience in Xinjiang, the CCP's show of power over the Uyghurs is evident throughout the province. Uyghurs armed with knives are no match for People's Liberation Army tanks, guns, and troops. The CCP has incentives to claim that it is engaged in counterterrorism, but that claim obscures the true explanation. Such a claim has better optics than the claim that the CCP is engaging in a coercive homogenization campaign.

Through the lens of the predatory-state framework, we interpreted the violence against Uyghurs as a byproduct of a discriminatory property rights regime in which the state appropriates assets from the citizenry. The CCP's substantial investments in cutting-edge policing and surveillance technologies have enabled predation, as have its tactics to reduce mobility, including the system of reeducation and forced-labor camps. In the minds of CCP decision makers, the benefits associated with coercive assimilation outweigh the immense costs, both to themselves in the form of budgetary expenses and to the citizenry in the form of predation. Taken together, the costs suggest that the CCP is aiming at something more than deterrence, as CCP decision makers have acted “to transform the Uyghurs... into loyal, largely secular supporters of the Communist Party” (Wong & Buckley, 2021).

Acknowledgements We're grateful for insightful comments from anonymous referees. We also thank Meina Cai, Tyler Cowen, Chris Coyne, Vincent Geloso, Chandler Reilly, Scott King, Henry Thompson, Marcus Shera, and participants at the 2020 Southern Economics Association and 2021 Public Choice Society meetings for valuable comments.

Author contributions All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Research and analysis was done by GWC. The first draft of the manuscript was written by GWC and all authors commented on subsequent drafts. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

¹¹ The same dynamic also played out in North America with colonial powers and settler-colonial governments, when indigenous peoples typically confronted extraction as state capacity increased, precisely because such increases in capacity included rising military capacity—which governments typically used to extract more from indigenous people. Hence, Candela and Geloso's (2020) finding that Native people were better off stateless.

Funding The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work. No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript. No funding was received for conducting this study. No funds, grants, or other support was received.

Data availability Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Code availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article. All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript. The authors have no financial/proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

Consent to participate Not applicable.

Consent for publication All information we have entered is correct at the time of signature. The copyright in the contribution is jointly owned by authors listed below.

Ethical approval Not applicable.

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