

*Old Dominion University*

*A SILENCED XINJIANG:*

*A Comparison of Eastern and Western Media Representation*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Xinjiang Autonomous Region is located in Northwestern China and it is home to the ethnic population of Uyghur Muslims. This location has also been center to possibly one of the most discussed human rights issues in the past decade. Following accusations of genocide and new-era concentration camps, the Chinese government has been under fire facing harsh international criticism. The main issue from which the current Uyghur unrest stems from is the forced Sinicization imposed by China's Communist party. Scholars Jennifer Ang and Maria Soloshcheva compellingly discussed the evolution of the treatment of minorities in China. Starting from imperial times, both authors emphasized the always present Han-centric ideology as the driving force in shaping the Chinese government's policies regarding the Uyghur population. Maria Soloshcheva specifically referred to the Chinese government's portrayal of recent Uyghur unrest as motivated by terrorist sentiments. This is now referred to as "Uyghur terrorism", and it does not only show China's islamophobia but also its complete and unlawful misrepresentation of the Uyghur minority. As news all over the world have become saturated month after month from the human rights abuses happening in Xinjiang, the aim of this essay is to produce a deeper inquiry into the different writing styles, tones, contents, and perspectives of select newspaper articles, comparing how the Uyghur problem is portrayed in Eastern and Western media. When it comes to media representation on the issues of Uyghur Muslims in China's Xinjiang province, both China and the United States manipulate information and silence the voices of the oppressed to perpetuate the political and economic rivalry between the two superpowers.

## BACKGROUND

In order to understand the evolution of Uyghur struggles over the years and charting the course of their unrest, it is important to refer to imperial China, traveling all the way back to the Han dynasty. Indeed, it is during the very Han dynasty that the concept of *Zhongguoren*, meaning Chinese people, was introduced. It was not a racial notion but a cultural concept. As Jennifer Ang stated in her article, “As a cultural notion, non-Han people can become Chinese or *Zhongguoren* if they embrace Han civilization—its culture (rituals and institutions) and economic development.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the term *Zhongguoren* represented the superiority of the Han ethnicity. This shows that Chinese imperialism worked in terms of assimilation, which means China recognized the Han ethnicity to be the one pure Chinese ethnicity and all others needed to acculturate to become truly Chinese.<sup>2</sup>

Jumping forward a few decades to the Qing dynasty, China experienced a reconceptualization in the way to incorporate new nomadic cultures in lands conquered during Qing rule (including Mongolia, Manchuria, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Tibet). During this time, especially driven by the unifying efforts of Sun Yat Sen’s advocacy, there was an evolution from the concept of *Zhongguoren*, which established the rule that foreign ethnicities needed to completely assimilate to Han civilization in order to be considered Chinese, to *Zhonghuaminzu* meaning Chinese nation, unifying all ethnicities into a whole multi-ethnic nation. The term *Zhonghuaminzu* represented the premise that China’s five peoples—the Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Hui—belonged to the same nation and racial group, differing only in

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Ang, “Sinicizing the Uyghurs,” *Peace Review* 28, no. 4 (2016): 399.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

terms of geographical and religious factors. This idea was introduced by Chiang Kai-Shek<sup>3</sup>, leader of the Kuomintang Nationalist party.

While Chiang Kai-Shek seemed to at least incorporate minority rights into the conversation, the 1950s under Chairman Mao's rule can be considered the most ambiguous time for the Uyghur population. On one hand, the Chinese government manipulated the idea of *Zhonghuaminzu*, publicly preaching the need for a nation built on multiculturalism but covertly engaging in Han-centric behavior. On more than one occasion, Mao's administration claimed genealogical ties with the minority peoples and laid historical claims to their lands. On the other hand, the Chinese government tended to group together ethnicities that did not belong together to exercise better control over minority populations and keep them contained. In the specific case of the Uyghurs, the Chinese government found it fitting to unite the separate branches of Turki people living in Xinjiang. This included Uyghurs, Kazaks, Kyrgyz, Tatars, and Uzbeks,<sup>4</sup> who are indeed from the same ethnolinguistic group but exercise very different cultural practices.

Referring to the naturalized inhabitants of the Xinjiang province, the Uyghur population was officially recognized as an ethnic minority in the People's Republic of China in the late 1900s.<sup>5</sup> However, in 2003 the Chinese Communist Party laid claim on the indigenous territory of Xinjiang by asserting that Uyghurs had no claim to the land, as specified in the official White Paper on the History and Development of Xinjiang.<sup>6</sup> According to the Chinese narrative, the Han Chinese were one of the earliest people to settle in Xinjiang (supposedly as early as 101 BCE), stating that the Uyghurs have only 3,800–3,900 years of history in Xinjiang.<sup>7</sup> While the Chinese

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Ang, "Sinicizing the Uyghurs," *Peace Review* 28, no. 4 (2016): 399.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

government's investment in today's autonomous region of Xinjiang brought development, it also brought on separatist sentiments rooted in the fear that the Chinese government would impose on the rights of ethnic populations.<sup>8</sup>

Almost inevitably, the Chinese government's perhaps false claims on Xinjiang and its unlawful manipulation of evidence to strip away rights from the Uyghur population triggered a series of violent uprisings. The worst one took place in the province's capital, Urumqi, in July 2009.<sup>9</sup> The conflict between Han Chinese and Uyghur Muslims left many injured and multiple dead, setting off "a heavy crackdown by security forces."<sup>10</sup> China portrayed these violent protests as terrorist attacks tied to Islamic terrorists and ISIS solely based on the Uyghurs' practice of Islam. This only deepened separatist sentiments in Xinjiang, and drew international attention and condemnation on China's repressive policies on the Uyghur population and the country's deeply rooted Islamophobia. Uyghur unrest today in direct correlation to the fact that most socioeconomic problems tied to the fragmentation Uyghur identity, which arose as an after product of the contradiction between the intended modernization and actual effects of Chinese policies on the minority population. Economically and socially, Han Chinese immigrants dominated the scene,<sup>11</sup> owning most major industries in the region and restricting access to good infrastructure, quality education, and fair job outlook for many Uyghurs.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the solutions Jennifer Ang proposed were for Uyghurs to confront their situation by building an ethno-religious consciousness so as to solidify Uyghur identity.<sup>13</sup> Building up a

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Ang, "Sinicizing the Uyghurs," 399-400.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 405.

movement based on a “consciousness of differences” is needed to reject the subjectivity of the oppressor.<sup>14</sup> She stated, “What is needed for the Uyghurs is to not see their emancipation as a mission to avenge past injustices by asserting their superiority, but instead, to aim at creating a humanist future.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the Chinese government must recognize that its policies of assimilation are indeed oppressive and extremely discriminatory. In masking their Sinicizing efforts as containing separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism, the Chinese government policies “restrict all aspects of Uyghur lives, from education and employment to political representation to faith and religious practice.”<sup>16</sup>

While Jennifer Ang presented a linear timeline of Uyghur struggles, highlighting problems and providing solutions to the currently evolving issues affecting the ethnic population in Xinjiang, Maria Soloshcheva focused her article on “Uyghur terrorism.” She defined Uyghur terrorism as the series of protests triggered by China’s oppressive rule in the region. As explained by Ang, the Chinese government faced international backlash for labeling such incidents as terrorist attacks and being associated to ISIS. Similarly, Soloshcheva emphasized that today, the Chinese Communist Party’s “anti-terrorist policies include military control over religion, education, migration and the internet.”<sup>17</sup> Some scholars, like Ang and Soloshcheva, argue that this extremely oppressive system was put in place under the name of anti-terrorist security forces. However, there are no real threats of such magnitude for which a system of this caliber would actually be needed. Instead, the Chinese government used the increased security system in Xinjiang to control and filter the information that reaches the outside world. In this

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<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Ang, “Sinicizing the Uyghurs,” 405.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Maria A. Soloshcheva, “The Uyghur Terrorism: Phenomenon and Genesis.” *Iran and the Caucasus* 21, no. 4 (2017): 423.

case, the outside world also comprehends the rest of mainland China as most Chinese citizens are unaware of the real situation in Xinjiang. Indeed, as Soloshcheva explained, the Chinese media is very focused on respecting the principle of non-interference when it comes to coverage on the Chinese Communist Party's internal affairs.<sup>18</sup> Over the years, the Chinese Communist Party has increasingly tightened regulations on internet use, banning all Google services and other mass media outlets that concern sensitive topics.<sup>19</sup> Soloshcheva highlighted that the forced oppression exercised by the Chinese government has indeed left the Uyghur problem unsolved and more intricate than ever before. The forced assimilation and the Chinese Communist Party's perception of nation is indubitably unacceptable for the Uyghur population, as is the Uyghur's resistance and worship to the Chinese government.<sup>20</sup>

## ANALYSIS

Based on the main points outlined in the scholarly articles of Jennifer Ang and Maria Soloshcheva, it is fair to narrow down the main causes of Uyghur unrest to the repressive policies of the Chinese Communist Party. Mainly focusing on the abuse of security forces and discriminatory behavior of forced assimilation, it is important to turn to various media sources to uncover the truth about media representation on the current Uyghur problem. Keeping in mind the main points outlined by Ang and Soloshcheva, this essay will analyze various newspaper excerpts from three different media outlets. The first will be a supposedly neutral source, *Human Rights Watch*, a non-profit that works closely with *Amnesty International* and other agencies to produce unbiased reports on current global humanitarian issues. Secondly, it is fundamental to compare and contrast media coverage on the Uyghur problem from both Chinese and American

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<sup>18</sup> Maria A. Soloshcheva, "The Uyghur Terrorism: Phenomenon and Genesis," 424.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 426.

sources. In particular, this paper will analyze two *China Daily* and two *New York Times* articles about the recent Xinjiang cotton boycott. Because of the multiplicity of different issues tied to the Xinjiang area, it is easier to focus on one specific issue, a very current one for the matter. The recent Xinjiang cotton boycott has been catching the attention of many global media outlets for its involvement of large name-brand companies like Nike, Gap, and H&M. Interestingly, depending on where you are in the world, you get a different version of the story, different secondary accounts on what is happening in Xinjiang and who is at fault. Therefore, the real question to ask is: “who is telling the truth?”

Journalist Akshaya Kumar wrote in her piece for *Human Rights Watch* that in light of the increased security measures in Xinjiang, China has specifically referred to the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy<sup>21</sup> to justify its inhumane actions on the Uyghur population. By claiming to follow international principles outlined by the United Nations to fight terrorism and, as Kumar stated, “by dragging the UN into the debate, the Chinese government is ratcheting up its move to cast the oppression of Turkic Muslims as counterterrorism, and trying to cloak these mass crimes with the legitimacy of multilateralism.”<sup>22</sup> The counter-terrorism principle called upon by the Chinese government, however, actually stresses the importance of upholding human rights, and condemns any violation of international human rights law.<sup>23</sup> With her argument, Akshaya Kumar effectively pointed out the Chinese double standard of claiming to uphold international counter-terrorism principles, while completely violating them and furtherly fueling terrorism in Xinjiang.

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<sup>21</sup> Akshaya Kumar, “Chinese Diplomats Try Using UN as Shield for Xinjiang Crimes,” *Human Rights Watch*, November 2, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/01/chinese-diplomats-try-using-un-shield-xinjiang-crimes#>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

When talking about the link between the global supply chain and forced labor in Xinjiang, a situation similar to that outlined by Kumar occurs. Journalists have been trying to find out more on this issue. However, there is extremely restricted access to the region. As in the case of China falsely adopting the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, it seems that China has been keeping its own citizens in the dark about Xinjiang. Referring to Soloshcheva's emphasis on China's extremely controlled mass media outlets, the Chinese Communist party has been holding up its act by twisting the information reaching the outside world. In her *Human Rights Watch* article, "People in China Left Wondering, 'What Happened in Xinjiang?'" , Yaqui Wang explained that, "For the past several years, the word 'Xinjiang' and the human rights abuses documented across the region had been taboo on the Chinese internet."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, a minor slip-up and leak of information opened up China's citizens to the truth about Xinjiang's cotton. However, Wang pointed out that, "Most netizens focused on expressing outrage at Western brands, [while only] some are asking questions about Xinjiang and criticizing the government's policies there."<sup>25</sup>

While the most imaginable reaction to a sudden flow of taboo information to the public would be for them to question their sources, Chinese citizens actually stayed faithful to their government. As some journalists who grew up in China, like Yaqui Wang, advocate that unintended leaks are an opportunity for people to start questioning their false reality,<sup>26</sup> the Chinese youth turned out to be the most ruthless actors in the online Xinjiang cotton debate. As *New York Times* journalists Raymond Zhong and Paul Mozur explained, the Chinese Communist Party's youth wing condemned H&M on social media by posting photos of slaves on a

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<sup>24</sup> Yaqui Wang, "People in China Left Wondering, 'What Happened in Xinjiang?'" *Human Rights Watch*, March 25, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/25/people-china-left-wondering-what-happened-xinjiang>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Mississippi cotton plantation<sup>27</sup> dating back to the American colonial slave-practice in the 1700s and 1800s. This was a very clever way to flip the conversation on its back, reminding everyone that China has not been the only country to abuse ethnic minorities. Furthermore, judging by the very name of the *New York Times* article, referring to the youth group as “China’s Outrage Machine”, it is easy to deduct that the American counterparts did not take the comment very well.

Another crucial point of Zhong and Mozur’s article was the assumption that the country’s considerable consumer market has been the only reason for peaceful cooperation between China and global big-name corporations,<sup>28</sup> alluding at the fact that economic gains are valued more than human lives. However, the very actor who denounces China’s, and other governments’, thirst for money is the country who also chooses to use economic threats to resolve the issue. As Peter Goodman, Vivian Wang, and Elizabeth Paton emphasized in their *New York Times* article, the United States announced that failure to remove Xinjiang cotton from global supply chains could result in an American ban on Chinese imports.<sup>29</sup> With this claim, the American administration dissociated itself from the Chinese consumers’ view of the U.S. boycott on Xinjiang cotton as “a Western plot to sabotage China’s development.”<sup>30</sup>

Looking at China’s counter-argument, Xinyu Tan wrote in her article for the *China Daily*, “The attack on Xinjiang cotton staged by the anti-China forces on the basis of ‘forced

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<sup>27</sup> Raymond Zhong, and Paul Mozur, “How China’s Outrage Machine Kicked Up a Storm Over H&M,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/29/business/china-xinjiang-cotton-hm.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Raymond Zhong, and Paul Mozur, “How China’s Outrage Machine Kicked Up a Storm Over H&M.”

<sup>29</sup> Peter S. Goodman, Vivian Wang, and Elizabeth Paton, “Global Brands Find It Hard to Untangle Themselves From Xinjiang Cotton” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/06/business/xinjiang-china-cotton-brands.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

labor’ makes them the laughingstock of the world.”<sup>31</sup> While referring to the accuses in Xinjiang as “forced labor” in quotation marks, diminishing and almost mocking the United States for its claims, Tan pointed out the “seamless teamwork”<sup>32</sup> of think tanks, NGOs, and multinational companies in accusing China of Xinjiang crimes. She stated that such institutions “have a clear division of functions — some fabricate the rumor, some hype it up and some act on it, all under the noble banner of human rights.”<sup>33</sup>

Adopting a similar tone, Xinyu Mei explained in her *China Daily* article, “Xinjiang Smear Reflects West's Moral Decline,” that the West’s claims of inhumane treatment of cotton laborers in Xinjiang were untrue and could not be evinced. In fact, the article outlined that welfare programs in Xinjiang prove there is no employment coercion in the cotton industry, emphasizing that the Xinjiang cotton boycott is a Western ploy to smear one of the main economic pillars of the region. Indeed, Mei stated, “The smear campaign against Xinjiang cotton and poverty alleviation work in the region reflects the moral degeneration of some Western politicians and media. But this trend, in the long run, will weaken the foundation of Western society and cast a shadow over its development, instead of hurting China.”<sup>34</sup> She also added that the anti-China forces’ efforts will have no effect on China’s bulletproof economy, as the country has adopted effective methods against foreign interference.<sup>35</sup> Once again, it is important to point out the article’s emphasis on China’s unshakable economy as opposed to discussing the condition of Uyghur lives in Xinjiang.

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<sup>31</sup> Xinyu Tan, “Xinjiang Cotton Boycott US-Led Burlesque: China Daily Editorial,” *China Daily*, March 31, 2021. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202103/31/WS6064606aa31024ad0bab2d91.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Xinyu Tan, “Xinjiang Cotton Boycott US-Led Burlesque: China Daily Editorial.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Xinyu Mei, “Xinjiang Smear Reflects West's Moral Decline,” *China Daily*, April 9, 2021. <https://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202104/09/WS606f8a26a31099a234355432.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

When analyzing all four of the articles, two from the U.S. and two from China, an almost absurd finger-pointing is legible through the lines. Starting from the very provocative headlines like “Xinjiang Cotton Boycott US-led Burlesque” and “China’s Outrage Machine”, both sides make it clear that they wish to come out of the debate triumphant. In all four articles there were references to economic policies and trade ban threats. It seemed like either side was more involved in ruining the reputation of the other than safeguarding Uyghur’s rights. While the American-based source was more subtle in its accusations, the *China Daily* articles were very direct in calling out the U.S. and other global powers who opposed China’s sale of the alleged forced labor cotton. Mei and Tan both attacked the morality of the U.S. administration in calling out the crimes in Xinjiang. They referred to such statements as a product of Western speculation and fake news. On the other side, the *New York Times* articles were much more toned down and faint. Nonetheless, they worked on insinuation, emphasizing China’s missteps and valorizing the United States’ efforts in fighting the valiant war against human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

In both Eastern and Western media coverage, there was a heavy focus on personal gains as opposed to the well-being of people. By maneuvering information to force the other into economic retaliation, the United States and China alike showed that when it comes to human rights, the vulnerable party is always forgotten. It appears as there are always greater things to discuss than human lives and the rights protected under international law that should guarantee a safe living to every individual. Analyzing newspapers is extremely helpful to uncover crucial details about a country. Newspapers are, and should, be the voice of the people. In the case of the *China Daily* being a newspaper funded directly by the Chinese Communist Party, it was predictable to see a notable siding with the government as opposed to the public. However, the truly unexpected variables were the *New York Times* articles. It seemed as the American authors,

supposedly having more freedom in expressing their opinions, were regurgitating the U.S. government's capitalist focus on the economy as the only problem-solving system, the go-to solution. It is also important to point out that the neutral source *Human Rights Watch*, an NGO designed in its very nature to side with the vulnerable party was closer to the American view of the issue. Whether it be for its subtlety or its counterpart's uncoverable violations, the *New York Times* saw more eye-to-eye with the global NGO. However, this does not mean that the *New York Times* justly advocated for the Uyghurs. On the contrary, by shifting the focus from individuals to economic gains, the American authors chipped away at the humanity needed to deal with such topics, almost becoming as predictably insensitive as their counterparts.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to point out the extreme lack of humanity in the media representation of Uyghur Muslims and their struggles. Focusing on the Xinjiang cotton boycott on the grounds of forced labor, American and Chinese newspapers alike failed to give a voice to the vulnerable party. Instead, the authors effectively portrayed the thirst for both countries to engage in their superpower race, with the ultimate goal to safeguard their reputation in the international economic system. What should be a global effort to combat human rights abuses turned into a race of who can exploit the situation the most. Through means of trade threats and economic ultimatums, both countries showed how successful manipulating information can be in gaining public consensus, leaving Uyghurs as silenced as they have always been through history.

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