

## Competing Historical Accounts and the Importance of Nationalised Mythology: Han Chinese ‘imaginaries’ and Uighur ‘realities’

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### Introduction

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region<sup>2</sup> is located in north-western China and was the site through which traders traversed the Silk Road. Through much of the twentieth century it was bordered by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, but since the breakup of the Soviet Union it is neighboured by Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Xinjiang has a diverse minority nationality (*shaoshu minzu*) population, and is home to the Uighurs, Huis, Mongolians, Kazakhs, Xibos, Kirgiz, Uzbeks, Manchus, Tatars, Tajiks, Daghurs and Russians, along with other minority groups who have recently been migrating to the region.<sup>3</sup> Its total population numbers in the vicinity of 20.5 million, of whom 60.3 percent belong to the minority nationalities.<sup>4</sup> The Uighurs have long been the region’s majority population and they number in the vicinity of 9.5 million. They currently account for nearly 46 percent of the region’s total population. However, their majority status within the region is changing due to continued Han Chinese migration to the province. In 1949, Uyghurs accounted for 76 percent of Xinjiang’s population. By 1964, this figure had dropped to 55 percent, it was 46 percent in 1986, returning to 47 percent by 1990.<sup>5</sup> This demonstrates that Han migration to the region has had a significant impact on the ethnic ratios in Xinjiang. In 1949, Han Chinese constituted only 6.7 percent of the population in Xinjiang. By 1990, this figure had risen to 37.6 percent.<sup>6</sup> The Han population recently reached 8.12 million and they now account for approximately 39.7 percent of the overall population in Xinjiang.<sup>7</sup>

It should also be noted that Xinjiang exists on the ‘borderlands’ of the Chinese state and the minority nationalities that populate it have long been apart from the dominant Han imagination. The region comprises peripheral peoples whose cultural, religious, economic and political differences run counter to the Chinese government’s notion of a multi-ethnic unified society. Chinese attempts at assimilation have not yet worked, and the racial

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as Xinjiang. ‘Uyghur’ and ‘Uighur’ are spelling variations for the same group of people.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Survey of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: 2007,’ Tianshan Net, accessed July 13, 2007, <http://www.tianshannet.com>. (Chinese).

<sup>4</sup> *Statistical Bureau of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook: 2007* (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2007). (Chinese).

<sup>5</sup> Baogang He and Yingjie Guo, *Nationalism, National Identity and Democratization in China* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p.147.

<sup>6</sup> Robyn Iredale, Naran Bilik, Wang Su, Fei Guo and Caroline Hoy, *Contemporary Minority Migration, Education and Ethnicity in China* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2001), p.166.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Survey of the Xinjiang.’

dichotomy of Han and non-Han seems pronounced, particularly amongst the Uighur diaspora. As the (shrinking) Uighur majority feel more insecure about their position in the province, attempts to cling to their differences, those things that make them ethnically different to the Han Chinese, are becoming more visible. Religion is one marked difference, and Joanne Smith Finley has highlighted the re-Islamising of Uighur society, including young women taking up wearing the veil and headscarves, as an example of the symbolic acts of community 'we-hood' among the Uighurs, which separates them from the Han Chinese in particular.<sup>8</sup>

In writing this paper, one of the central questions that can be posed is what does Xinjiang represent?<sup>9</sup> For those who support, and hold fast to, the notion of an independent East Turkistan,<sup>9</sup> Xinjiang (East Turkistan) can be viewed as a colonised state, a territory yearning for its rightful independence. For others, Xinjiang is viewed as a legitimate province of greater China. Therefore, exactly what Xinjiang constitutes presents a conundrum and it could reasonably be suggested that the race riots, acts of terrorism and separatism within the region, and the brutal crackdowns that continue to dominate any attempts by the Uighurs to challenge the status quo, are all outward manifestations of this conundrum. According to Albert Memmi, the end result of colonial conquest 'is that it is impossible for the colonial situation to last because it is impossible to arrange it properly'.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he argues that pursuit of the truth is important in resolving such a situation as '[a]ll truth is useful and positive because it cuts through illusion'.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, we need to begin by considering the history of the region in order to try to locate the 'truth' as it applies to Xinjiang. However, like the discord found among the societies that comprise Xinjiang, we find that the historical 'truths' are equally troublesome.

### Contested historical narratives

Xinjiang has a highly contentious history, which has often been politicised and manipulated in an effort to support either side of the debate over its contested sovereignty. As discussed elsewhere by Michael Clarke,<sup>12</sup> in 2003, a government *White Paper* issued by the People's

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<sup>8</sup> Joanne Smith Finley, 'Chinese Oppression in Xinjiang, Middle Eastern Conflicts and Global Islamic Solidarities among the Uyghurs,' *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, 53 (2007), pp.627–654.

<sup>9</sup> East Turkistan and Xinjiang refer to the same geographic area and are both used throughout this paper. Their use is primarily dictated by whose voice is being expressed at the time of use and should not be read as a political statement in favour of either of these names for the region.

<sup>10</sup> Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (trans. Howard Greenfield with Introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre and New Introduction by Nadine Gordimer), (London: Earthscan Publications, 2003), p.190.

<sup>11</sup> Memmi, *The Colonizer*, p.190.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Clarke, 'The Problematic Progress of 'Integration' in the Chinese State's Approach to Xinjiang, 1759-2005,' *Asian Ethnicity* 8, 3 (2007), pp.261–89.

Republic of China's (PRC) Information Office of the State Council (2003) put forth the argument that Xinjiang had been an 'inseparable part of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation' since the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). Similarly, Gardner Bovingdon reported that Chinese texts on the history of Xinjiang generally begin with a statement purporting that it has been a part of China since 'ancient times'.<sup>13</sup> However, Chinese claims of continuous rule are often countered on a few fronts.

Firstly, the name Xinjiang (which Bovingdon has referred to as a 'bone of contention' between Uighurs and Han Chinese<sup>14</sup>) is translated into English as 'New Frontier/Territory'. This translation signifies that when the name was given to the territory, it was a recent territorial acquisition by the Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911). Prior to the introduction of Xinjiang as the name for the region, the area was part of what the Han-era rulers referred to as Xiyu or the 'Western Regions'. However, Xiyu was a problematic name for the area because it was not specific and it caused there to be ambiguity as to what territory actually constituted Xiyu. For instance, other areas of contemporary China, such as Qinghai, could reasonably have been included into the territory described as Xiyu. As James Millward reminds us, in China '[n]ames ...are not mere conventions. They have political force, and can be used to establish "truth"'.<sup>15</sup> In 1763, after the Qing conquests throughout Xiyu, there was an imperially-sponsored project in order to standardise names throughout the region. Out of this process the term Xinjiang emerged. When it was conceived and applied, the name Xinjiang was important as unlike Xiyu it had no prior historical associations and it specifically referred to the newest province of the Qing Empire.

As the territorial entity called 'Xinjiang' only came into being in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this 'truth' alone would seemingly be a significant refutation of the continuous rule claim.<sup>16</sup> However, the 'New Frontier/Territory' translation of Xinjiang is contested by the above-mentioned government White Paper. It favours a translation such as 'old territory returned to the motherland'.<sup>17</sup> This translation, and more importantly, what this translation tries to claim, does not make sense, historically or linguistically. In fact, Clarke regards the long-held government assertion that there has been continuous Chinese rule of Xinjiang since the

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<sup>13</sup> Gardner Bovingdon, *Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p.24.

<sup>14</sup> Bovingdon, *Uyghurs*, p.24.

<sup>15</sup> James Millward, 'Positioning Xinjiang in Eurasian and Chinese History: Differing visions of the 'Silk Road'', in *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia: History, Transition and Crossborder Interaction into the 21st Century* (eds Colin Mackerras and Michael Clarke), (New York: Routledge, 2009), p.57.

<sup>16</sup> Dru Gladney, 'Responses to Chinese Rule: Patterns of Cooperation and Opposition,' in *Xinjiang China's Muslim Borderland* (ed. Frederick Starr), (New York: ME Sharpe, 2004), pp.375–96; Clarke, 'The Problematic Progress,' pp.261–89; and Millward, 'Positioning Xinjiang,' pp.55–74.

<sup>17</sup> 'White Paper on History and Development of Xinjiang,' Information of the State Council, accessed September 14, 2011, [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200305/26/print20030526\\_117240.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200305/26/print20030526_117240.html).

Han dynasty to be a 'spurious historical claim'.<sup>18</sup> This is because the annexation of the province into the Qing Empire was really only finalised in 1884, although Qing control of the territory continued to be challenged by the local populations after its incorporation into imperial China proper.<sup>19</sup>

Prior to 1884 however, it is worthwhile considering that the Central Asian region, including modern day Xinjiang, was an area that experienced constant flows of people, culture and goods in and out of the regions. For centuries, the Turkic peoples of modern day Xinjiang experienced direct contact with, were influenced by, and sometimes came under the direct control of, the Chinese. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), a substantial part of the territory was under the control of the Han for approximately one hundred years. The Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE) also controlled much of Xinjiang for approximately one hundred years. Control of the northern and southern parts of the region was again exerted by the Chinese from 1759 as part of the Qing dynasty's expansion during that period. Therefore, there most certainly were periods throughout history that modern-day Xinjiang did experience direct rule by Chinese dynastic empires. Just like the Chinese government's unease over the '[g]ames with names',<sup>20</sup> the above-mentioned historical realities are uneasy 'truths' for Uighur nationalists, particularly those who have tried to write these periods of Chinese rule out of the regional history.<sup>21</sup>

While a detailed overview of the history of the region is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note a few important historical 'truths' in order to seek out a more centrist historical reality of the region. During the period 1700-1900, Xinjiang was a pivotal region among competing powers in Central Asia. It held importance for both the Russians and the Chinese as they sought to expand their military and political control of parts of the Central Asian region, and it was significant to the British, who wanted a buffer between its colonial Indian territory and an expanding Russian imperialist state.<sup>22</sup> By 1759, the Manchu Qing rulers of China had asserted control over the region through a ruthless and bloody conquest which saw some parts of northern Xinjiang depopulated as a result.<sup>23</sup> However, rather than incorporating Xinjiang into China, from 1759 to 1820 the Qing

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<sup>18</sup> Clarke, 'The Problematic Progress,' p.275.

<sup>19</sup> Gladney, 'Responses to Chinese Rule,' pp.375–96; Clarke, 'The Problematic Progress,' pp.261–89; and Millward, 'Positioning Xinjiang,' pp.55–74. For further reading on the different historiographies of Xinjiang see Gardner Bovingdon with Nabijan Tursun, 'Contested Histories,' in *Xinjiang China's Muslim Borderland* (ed. Frederick Starr), (New York: ME Sharpe, 2004), pp.353–374.

<sup>20</sup> Millward, 'Positioning Xinjiang,' p.56.

<sup>21</sup> Bovingdon, *Uyghurs*, p.25.

<sup>22</sup> Clarke, 'The Problematic Progress,' 267; and Michael Clarke, 'The 'centrality' of Central Asia in World History, 1700-2007: From pivot to periphery and back again?', p.29.

<sup>23</sup> Bovingdon, *Uyghurs*, pp.31–33.

regarded the territory to be a colony of the Qing, and they actually sought to 'segregate and isolate Xinjiang from China' so that it could provide a buffer between themselves and Russia.<sup>24</sup> Understandably, during this time, the province was marred by uprisings, rebellions and sustained unrest as local populations resisted Qing rule. This caused the Qing rulers and elites to question whether or not they should retain the territory, and on a number of occasions there were suggestions that the Qing should abandon the colony, clearly demonstrating it was not believed to be an 'inseparable' part of the empire' at that given time.<sup>25</sup>

After the fall of the Qing dynasty, there was still resistance to Chinese rule by the minority nationalities. This resistance was sometimes aided by Russia, which still sought to exert influence or control over parts of the region. In an attempt to retain the territory, and to stop Russia from gaining a stronger foothold there, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century Han Chinese migration to the region was encouraged. It was believed this migration would cause there to be a 'Hanisation' of Xinjiang, which would displace the local minority nationality populations. In addition, for those populations who remained in the region, it was proposed that schooling local non-Han children under the Confucian model would assist in culturally assimilating the local non-Han peoples into the Chinese state.<sup>26</sup> These displacement and assimilation policies had two key goals. Firstly, it was hoped that Xinjiang would become better integrated into China, thereby removing the threat of future rebellions or unrest. Secondly, it was argued that it would also help to distance Xinjiang from Central Asia.<sup>27</sup>

However, full integration and assimilation with China was not easily achieved. This was clearly demonstrated in 1933 when continued Uighur resistance to Chinese rule led to the establishment of the East Turkistan Republic in Khotan. The newly established Republic had an independent Uighur government, and it covered much of southern Xinjiang. It was relatively short-lived however, and in 1934, Ma Zhongying, a regional warlord, took Kashgar by force thereby ending the Republic. Even so, the significance of the independent Republic still has *gravitas* for Uighur nationalists to the present day.<sup>28</sup> For them, this is an important 'truth' in the nationalised mythology of the Uighur.

Similarly, the second East Turkistan Republic, established in 1944 by Kazakh and Uighur forces, has also been an important 'truth' in the formation of the Uighurs'

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<sup>24</sup> Clarke, 'The Problematic Progress,' p.263; and Bovingdon, *Uyghurs*, p.33.

<sup>25</sup> Bovingdon, *Uyghurs*, p.33.

<sup>26</sup> James Millward and Nabijan Tursan, 'Political Histories and Strategies of Control, 1884-1978,' in *Xinjiang China's Muslim Borderland* (ed. Frederick Starr), (New York: ME Sharpe, 2004), p.66.

<sup>27</sup> Clarke, 'The Problematic Progress', p.268.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Dillon, *China: A Modern History* (London: IB Tauris, 2010); and Millward and Tursan, 'Political Histories'.

nationalised mythology. This Republic controlled the north-western Ghulja region from 1944 to 1949.<sup>29</sup> In September 1949, the Republic was surrendered to the CCP after one of its political leaders, Burhan, pledged his allegiance to the CCP.<sup>30</sup> However, this was not a decision accepted by all and shortly after the surrender, eight East Turkistani political leaders were to travel to Beijing to negotiate and finalise details over the territory's position in China. However, the East Turkistani political leaders were killed *en route* to Beijing, either in an aircraft accident (official Chinese account), or were executed in Panfilov on the orders of Joseph Stalin acting alone, or with Mao Zedong (a claim made by East Turkistan Republic at the time and one that continues to this day).<sup>31</sup>

After the deaths of the East Turkistani leaders, Xinjiang remained a province of the People's Republic of China. However, there was sustained East Turkistani resistance to Chinese rule, but it was called local 'banditry' in official Chinese accounts. This resistance continued until 1954, after which it reduced in scale, although it did not disappear completely.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, during the more radical years under Mao Zedong, such as the Anti-Rightist Policy (1957), the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), the Uighurs and other minority nationalities suffered significant hardship and cultural dislocation. In his essay titled 'The Question of the Minority Nationalities', Mao Zedong identified what he believed to be the underlying causes of continuing unrest in minority nationality areas. He stated:

It is imperative to foster good relations between the Han people and the minority nationalities. The key to this question lies in overcoming Han chauvinism. At the same time, efforts should also be made to overcome local nationalism, wherever it exists among the minority nationalities. Both Han chauvinism and local nationalism are harmful to the unity of the nationalities; they represent a specific contradiction among the people which should be overcome.<sup>33</sup>

The Han chauvinism referred to by Mao Zedong can be likened to Memmi's characterisation of the 'coloniser':

A foreigner, having come to a land by the accidents of history, he has succeeded not merely in creating a place for himself but also in taking away that of the inhabitant, granting himself astounding privileges to the detriment of those rightfully entitled to them. ...He is a privileged being and an illegitimately privileged one; that is, a

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<sup>29</sup> This period is more commonly known in China as the 'Three Districts Revolution'.

<sup>30</sup> Dillon, *China. A Modern*, p.377.

<sup>31</sup> Dillon, *China. A Modern*, p.377; and Millward and Tursan, 'Political Histories,' p.86.

<sup>32</sup> Millward and Tursan, 'Political Histories,' p.86; and Bovingdon, *Uyghurs*, p.5.

<sup>33</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (trans. Editorial Committee for the Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tse-Tung), (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), p.372.

usurper. Furthermore, this is so, not only in the eyes of the colonised, but in his own as well.<sup>34</sup>

It would appear that Han chauvinism remains a feature of the contemporary societal landscape in Xinjiang.<sup>35</sup> Colin Mackerras reported that there is a feeling among Uighurs that they are treated as ‘inferiors’ by the Han Chinese, and that they have become ‘second-class citizens in their own land’.<sup>36</sup> Local nationalism is also alive and well. The post-Mao era has been marked by continual ethnic unrest in Xinjiang. The early 1980s were a turbulent time with separatist movements becoming involved in factional, anti-government conflict. Resistance to the government was swiftly countered however, and this again increased racial tension in the region,<sup>37</sup> and there were also conflicts between local groups and Han migrants.<sup>38</sup> There was heightened unrest during the summers of 1996 and 1997. This was in part a reaction against CCP attempts to eliminate separatism in Xinjiang as part of their nationwide ‘Strike Hard’ campaign.<sup>39</sup> This instability has continued to the present day and it has intensified from time to time, most recently witnessed in the race riots in Urumqi in July 2009 and the July 2011 attacks in Kashgar and Khotan.

The July 2009 riots were reported to have begun following the beating deaths of two Uighur factory workers in southern China by their Han Chinese co-workers.<sup>40</sup> The killings led to widespread protests and violence erupting across Xinjiang. The riots that followed resulted in the death of approximately 197 people, 1,600 people were injured and 1,434 people were detained.<sup>41</sup> In 2011, further violence broke out on the anniversary of this event in Kashgar and Khotan, when Uighur groups launched separate attacks in the two cities. One of the reasons given for the violence was the detention, without trial, of many young Uighur men after the anniversary of the 2009 riots. In addition, tensions were also heightened by the government’s destruction of traditional Uighur houses in Kashgar. The

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<sup>34</sup> Memmi, *The Colonizer*, p.53.

<sup>35</sup> Gardner Bovington, ‘The Not-So-Silent Majority: Uyghur Resistance to Han Rule in Xinjiang,’ *Modern China* 28, 1 (2002), pp.39–78.

<sup>36</sup> Colin Mackerras, ‘Ethnicity in China: The Case of Xinjiang,’ *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 8, 1 (2004), accessed May 1, 2010, <http://www.asiaquarterly.com/content/view/142/40/>.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Van Wie Davis, ‘Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China,’ *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 35, 1 (2008), pp.15–30; Justin Rudelson and William Jankowiak, ‘Acculturation and Resistance: Xinjiang Identities in Flux,’ in *Xinjiang China’s Muslim Borderland* (ed. Frederick Starr), (New York: ME Sharpe, 2004), pp.299–319; Clarke, ‘The ‘centrality’’, pp.21–54; and Colin Mackerras, ‘Xinjiang and Central Asia since 1990: views from Beijing and Washington and Sino-American Relations,’ in *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia. History, Transition and Crossborder Interaction into the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (eds Colin Mackerras and Michael Clarke), (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp.133–150.

<sup>38</sup> Mackerras, ‘Ethnicity in China’; and Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Far Northwest* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Gladney, ‘Responses to Chinese Rule’; and Dillon, *Xinjiang*.

<sup>40</sup> John Roberts, *A History of China*, 3rd edn. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Helena Lewis, ‘Xinjiang: An Inevitable Explosion,’ Amnesty International, accessed March 28, 2011, <http://www.amnesty.org.au/china/comments/21781>.

demolition of these houses, labelled 'unsafe' and 'unsanitary' by Beijing, is viewed by the Uighurs as both cultural destruction and an attempt by Beijing to 'to break up their communities and reduce their influence in the city'.<sup>42</sup> When claims such as these occur they are swiftly countered by Chinese authorities. However, the treatment of minority nationalities during these periods of unrest has further increased Uighur resentment against Chinese rule.<sup>43</sup>

The discussion above represents some of the historical 'truths' of the region. It also challenges the official version of history which states there has been continuous Chinese rule in Xinjiang since the Han dynasty. This is a challenge supported by Millward, who has argued elsewhere that the perpetuation of this 'historical falsehood' has 'backed' Chinese historians and ideologues 'into a corner' because it is not based on historical 'reality'.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, this historical falsehood does not reflect the lived experience of the Uighurs and it has occurred against the backdrop of the development and reinforcement of an important Han Chinese national mythology. This mythology has been centred on Chinese humiliation and victimisation at the hands of external powers, and it portrays China as a victim of western imperialism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This mythology, which is centred in reality, as China did suffer territorial losses and significant encroachments on its territory, has had an important impact on the national psyche of the Chinese. It has been useful in uniting Han Chinese together and there has been much national pride in their nation's ability to overcome these obstacles. This history is briefly detailed in the discussion that follows.

### **The importance of nationalised mythologies**

Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, China experienced frequent contact with European maritime traders and accompanying envoys. These traders sought ports on Chinese soil in order to conduct their business, leading to increasing foreign territorial encroachment on the Qing Empire. Furthermore, these traders and envoys often bypassed the Chinese tributary system, thereby offending the Qing rulers. However, unlike the Europeans, who had a proclivity for Chinese tea, silk and porcelain, the Chinese desired very little from the European traders. Therefore, the trade was marked by high exports to Europe, and low imports to China. Furthermore, silver was the only currency the Chinese would accept for

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Dillon, 'Death on the Silk Route: Violence in Xinjiang,' BBC News, August 3, 2011, accessed August 22, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-14384605>.

<sup>43</sup> Yueyao Zhao, 'Pivot or Periphery? Xinjiang's Regional Development,' *Asian Ethnicity* 2, 2 (2001), pp.197–224.

<sup>44</sup> Millward, 'Positioning Xinjiang', p.71.



their exports. This was particularly worrisome for the British Empire, which had to exchange its gold for European silver, which incurred additional costs to them when they traded with the Chinese. Over time, these factors caused significant tensions to grow, and in an attempt to try to counter the trade imbalance, the British began to export opium (grown in colonial India) to the Chinese. This was achieved through a trade triangle between Britain, India and China, via a combination of legal and illicit trade routes.<sup>45</sup>

The opium trade, and the resultant widespread opium addiction, caused many social problems to erupt across China. While imports of opium were already banned in China, and an imperial edict prohibiting its use had been passed in 1729, opium use continued to increase and it eventually resulted in a reversal of the trade balance between China and Britain. As the trade increased, and more silver left China for Britain, the British government tried to bypass the Canton system so they could maximise their profits and protect British rights. After a period of diplomatic tussles back and forth, in 1836 the Qing finally ordered a suppression of opium and there was a crackdown on opium addicts and dealers. This caused the price of opium to plummet, and opium stocks were confiscated by the Chinese and destroyed. In response to these actions, there was a limited naval clash in Canton between British and Chinese vessels as tensions escalated. Shortly after that a formal declaration of war was made by the British and in June 1840, a British naval fleet arrived in China. The fleet travelled up the Chinese coastline to Beihe and several skirmishes were fought. The conflict ended in 1842, when the Treaty of Nanjing was signed. This was a humiliating experience for the Chinese who were forced to accept British trade and residence across five of their ports, including Canton and Shanghai. The Qing were forced to pay war reparations, to cover the costs of the opium cargo it had destroyed, and to pay the outstanding debts still owed to British merchants by Chinese merchants. The amount paid totalled twenty-one million Spanish silver dollars. The Treaty also set the tone for China's future trade agreements and relations with other European powers, one which cast the Chinese in a subservient position to the West. The other spoil of the conflict for the British was the territory of Hong Kong,<sup>46</sup> which was ceded to the British in perpetuity.<sup>47</sup>

In the lead-up to the Second Opium War (1856 – 1860), both the British and the French wanted to renegotiate the terms of the Treaty of Nanjing, making it even more favourable to their interests. One of their demands was that they be allowed to have

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<sup>45</sup> Conrad Schirokauer, Miranda Brown, David Lurie, and Suzanne Gay, *A Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilisations*, 4th edn. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2013); Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *China: A Cultural, Social and Political History* (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2006); and Roberts, *A History*.

<sup>46</sup> In 1898, the *Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory* also granted the British the territory of Kowloon, and the New Territories were leased to the British for 99 years.

<sup>47</sup> Schirokauer et al., *A Brief History*; Ebrey, *China: A Cultural*; and Roberts, *A History*.

permanent ambassadors in Beijing. This was resisted by the Qing, who equated ambassadors to spies and therefore did not welcome their presence. After the Anglo-French forces entered China via the ports in Tianjin, the Qing tried to halt their advance on Beijing. In response, 11,000 British and 6,700 French soldiers were dispatched, and they stormed the city. While they originally intended to attack the palace (*Gugong*), they were talked down by the Russian ambassador to China, and they instead looted and then torched the Summer Palace complex.<sup>48</sup> After the attack, the Chinese were forced to concede even more territory to western powers. Under the Treaty of Beijing (1860), the Qing were also forced to allow foreign ambassadors to reside in Beijing, open eleven new trading ports, and they were forced to grant travel rights to those wanting to traverse China's interior. Today, the ruins of the Summer Palace complex remain an important historical site and are visited by tourists and nationalists alike. They are an important reminder of China's national humiliation at the hands of western imperialist forces.<sup>49</sup> However, this national mythology also has great significance for Xinjiang. This is because within this mythology resides an historical contradiction, which can be demonstrated in the argument that follows.

A trip to Fragrant Hills Park (*Xiangshan Gongyuan*) or the Summer Palace (*Yiheyuan*) in Beijing provides ample evidence of this nationalised mythology of Chinese victimisation by external forces. In the Fragrant Hills Park, there is a crumbling stairway that leads to nothing. It is memorialised as being the remains of a building that was formerly used as a holiday retreat by the Emperor. Tourists are informed (in both Chinese and English)



**Figure 1** This crumbling staircase in Fragrant Hills Park, Beijing, memorialises China's national humiliation by Anglo-French forces in 1860. (Photo by Anna Hayes)

that the building was destroyed in an attack by 'Anglo-French forces' in 1860 and all that remains is the stairway.

<sup>48</sup> Schirokauer et al., *A Brief History*; and Ebrey, *China: A Cultural*.

<sup>49</sup> Schirokauer et al., *A Brief History*; Ebrey, *China: A Cultural*; and Roberts, *A History*.

Likewise, at the Summer Palace, tourists are directed to examine remnants of marble from original buildings in the Palace grounds that were burnt down in attacks by ‘Anglo-



**Figure 2** This cypress tree, located at the Summer Palace in Beijing, also memorialises Anglo-French aggression against the Qing.

French forces’ in 1860. One particular monument to the past is an old gnarled tree trunk enclosed by a marble fence (See Image 2). The sign, in both Chinese and English, detailing the monument’s importance is entitled ‘The Cypress Tree That Was’. The description on the sign is reproduced below from a photograph of the original sign taken by the author in 2003:

This is what remains of a cypress tree that was burned down in 1860 when the Anglo-French Forces set fire to the Garden of Clear Ripples. When the Hall of Serenity was rebuilt in 1996, this stump was preserved to mark this historical event.

A pictorial book entitled *Beijing Scenes* (Hu & Gao 1993) bought from a street vendor by the author in 1995 provides further evidence of this type of memorialisation. The book contains a stylised night time picture of the Garden of Gardens (*Yuanmingyuan*) complete with half-moon and green up-lighting of the ruins, set against a red sunset. The caption for the picture states in Chinese, Japanese and English:

Yuanmingyuan was completely destroyed and plundered by the British-French Allied Forces in 1860. The damaged stone statues and pillars under the moonlight look like exclamation marks under the canopy of the heavens, calling for reminiscences and deep thoughts.<sup>50</sup>

It could reasonably be suggested that the ‘deep thoughts’ and ‘reminiscences’ called for by the caption are ones centred on Chinese victimisation at the hands of foreign imperialists, and to view such acts as something regrettable with the hope that they would never occur again. This is the essence of the historical contradiction of China’s national mythology. One could ask why there are calls for sympathy for Chinese victims of western imperial aggression and territorial encroachment, but not for victims of Qing imperial aggression and territorial encroachment like what was experienced in Xinjiang?

Furthermore, considering the Chinese memorialisation of the acts perpetrated by Anglo-French aggression so many years ago, the Chinese have demonstrated they

<sup>50</sup> Weibiao Hu and Hong Gao (eds), *Beijing Scenes* (Beijing: Beijing Arts and Photography Publishing House, 1993), p.41.

understand the value of mythologising past mistreatment by foreign powers. While there have been recent calls for China to move beyond this kind of national mentality,<sup>51</sup> as mentioned above it is a national mythology that has long bound Han Chinese together and it has provided a public memory of shared experiences, and ultimately, national survival against external pressures. However, the Uighurs have their own national mythologies and memorialisation of Chinese aggression. In addition, many Uighurs still regard themselves to be ‘colonised’ peoples. This memorialisation plays a key role in continuing assertions of, and attempts to attain, independence from the Chinese state. The mythology of the Uighurs is very much like the Chinese mythology. It is the mythology of (Uighur) victimisation at the hands of (Qing) imperialist forces. This mythology is a potent unifier, and is one that is publicly found in museum exhibitions by the Uighur diaspora, where regional histories that run counter to the official Chinese version of history are able to be exhibited.

In 2011, the Adelaide Uighur community curated an exhibition in the community exhibition space known as ‘The Forum’ at the Migration Museum, Adelaide, titled ‘East Turkistan Uighur Culture: A History and Contribution of Uighur People in Australia’ (10 June – 9 September 2011). This exhibition offered a very different perspective of the Uighur territorial homeland than official Chinese government accounts. It depicted the territory known as Xinjiang as occupied lands, preferring territory East Turkistan. It labelled artefacts as East Turkistan, not Xinjiang, signalling a the notion that the Chinese are the legitimate region (see Image 3). Furthermore, they the Chinese annexation in 1949 as ‘re-occupation’, labelling the region on a map as being ‘Under Control of Chinese Invader’, again clearly demonstrating their refutation of Chinese rule of their homeland.

For many Uighurs who have fled China, Xinjiang has not faded from their memory. The Uighur diaspora has become increasingly

important in raising international awareness of the sources of tension in the region. Among members of the Uighur diaspora, the Chinese annexation of East Turkistan (Xinjiang) into China in 1949 is viewed as an ongoing occupation, and they continue to claim independent statehood. Furthermore, they argue that since this time, the Uighurs have been occupied peoples subject to continued persecution and oppression by Chinese authorities, who they



to call the coming from rejection of rulers of the documented

**Figure 3** an example of one of the artefact labels rejecting Chinese rule of Xinjiang. (Photo by Anna Hayes)

<sup>51</sup> See Dillon, *China*, pp.415–16.

claim have maintained power and control over the region through the brutal suppression of independence movements in East Turkistan (ETAA 2011).<sup>52</sup>

This nationalised mythology of the Uighur is important in solidifying transnational sentiment among the Uighur diaspora. The Uighur diaspora has developed a diaspora consciousness that binds exiled Uighurs to one another, and to their former homeland. According to Amalendu Misra: '[t]he favoured mode of nationalist struggle on the part of many communities' aspiring self-determination is to confront the issue both from within and outside'.<sup>53</sup> The nationalised mythology of the Uighurs is an important mobilising force in this regard among the Uighur diaspora. Furthermore, much of the burden of the Uighur nationalist struggle lies with the Uighur diaspora because police and security forces act quickly to counter Uighur demonstrations and separatist attempts in Xinjiang. This is not to say that acts of defiance and resistance from within Xinjiang don't occur, they most certainly do. However, when events such as these occur they are countered by Chinese authorities, and this often results in more Uighurs fleeing persecution in China. For those who dare defy and resist, their experiences add to the collective nationalised mythology of the Uighurs: that is, oppression at the hands of an imperial force.

## Conclusion

The above discussion has highlighted the competing historical accounts of Xinjiang (East Turkistan). They are based on Han Chinese 'imaginaries', including notions of continuous Chinese rule since the Han dynasty, but they are also based on Uighur 'realities', including experiences of colonisation and yearnings for independence. These contested histories present a conundrum for the region. Complicating this further, however, is that alongside this historical conundrum, are two entrenched, and contradictory, nationalised mythologies. For the Han Chinese, their historical experiences have shaped their nationalised mythology. They have memorialised the humiliation they experienced at the hands of European powers, that is, territorial annexation and imperial aggression. The Uighurs have a similar nationalised mythology. Theirs is also based on territorial annexation and imperial aggression, only in this instance it is by the Chinese, not European powers.

The nationalised mythology of the Uighurs differs from the Chinese experience however, as the Uighurs have not 'freed' themselves from these historical 'shackles'. If we revisit Memmi and his thoughts on colonisation we find he concludes:

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<sup>52</sup> 'About ETAA,' East Turkistan Association of Australia, accessed October 10, 2011, <http://www.etaa.org.au>.

<sup>53</sup> Amalendu Misra, 'A nation in exile: Tibetan diaspora and the dynamics of long distance nationalism,' *Asian Ethnicity* 4, 2 (2003), pp.189–206.

Colonized society is a diseased society in which internal dynamics no longer succeed in creating new structures. Its century-hardened face has become nothing more than a mask under which it slowly smothers and dies. *Such a society cannot dissolve the conflicts of generations, for it is unable to be transformed.*<sup>54</sup>

However, in addition to highlighting the plight of the colonised, Memmi also provides a warning for colonisers. He states: '[t]he colony's life is frozen; its structure is both corseted and hardened... if the discord becomes too sharp, and harmony becomes impossible to attain under existing legal forms, the result is either to revolt or to be calcified'.<sup>55</sup> This warning has resonance for Xinjiang, as internal conflict and revolt continues to be a feature of Xinjiang's social and political fabric. The conundrum and the contradiction feed this 'diseased society', as it denies the 'realities' of the Uighurs, by virtue of re-writing, and denying them their rightful position in the region's history.

The last bastion of western imperialist power and cause of Chinese humiliation was the colonial territory of Macau, which was returned to China by Portugal in 1999. Furthermore, just two years earlier, there was much media attention, and concern, when the United Kingdom handed Hong Kong, Kowloon and the New Territories back to China. What is notable is that these territories were seized from China more than one hundred years prior to their return. However, the Chinese government never relinquished its desire to take back control of these territories and, since returned, they have become important symbols of reunification and Chinese nationalism.

Similarly, nationalistic Uighurs share the same desire. If we return to the time period when China first incorporated Xinjiang as a formal 'province' of China, using impartial historiography, we settle on 1884. However, after this date there was continued conflict over the territory, with the East Turkistan Republic taking control over part of the territory on two separate occasions. Therefore, it was only in 1949 that East Turkistan was most recently annexed into China. This raises an important question: How many years need to pass before claims for independent statehood expire? China reclaimed the territories of Macau and Hong Kong more than a century after they were taken by imperialist powers. It is likely that the Uighurs will also take a long-term stand on this issue.

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<sup>54</sup> Memmi, *The Coloniser*, pp.142–43. (Emphasis added by author).

<sup>55</sup> Memmi, *The Coloniser*, p.142.