The Turkic people known as Uyghur will most likely be in the same situation at the beginning of the next millennium as they have been for most of this one: an internalized colonized people with few illusions or understanding of what the Chinese state, or even the Uyghur (and perhaps many others like them) have been internally colonized by the Chinese state.

The categorization and taxonomization of all levels of Chinese society, from political economy, to class, to gender, to ethnicity and bioethnically represents a wide-ranging and ongoing project of internal colonialism. Though now long subdued, the debate provoked by Michael Hetherington’s 1976 history, Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1358-1960, led scholars to consider applying Hechter’s model to many other societies beyond England and Ireland. Hetherington suggests that the channeling of certain peoples into hierarchical cultural divisions of labor is a feature of colonial administrations led to the development of ethnic identities which superseded class. This “internal colonialism” is predicated upon the unequal rates of exchange between the urban power-centres and the peripheral, often ethnic, hinterlands. In his study of ‘The Celtic Fringe’, Hetherington traces the national development of the post-colonial British state, as though these areas were still under colonial exploitation.

Internal colonialism was found to be applicable to South Africa, Thailand, Sudan, Wales, Brit- tany, Quebec, Austria-Hungary (as it was formerly), Scotland, Bangladesh, Cherokee Native Americans, Chicanos in America, the Palestini- ans in Israel, and the original intent behind and reason for the success of Stalin’s nationalities policy in the Soviet Union (Goldfrank 1978: 14). The majority of these examples stress the exploitation of the many ethnicities, who are less culturally homogeneous than the dominant traditions of the few urban power elite who control access to and distribution of capital. Interestingly, though the theory was later criticized and gen- eralized to being too general and too widely applicable, it was never applied to China. It is quite ironic that while the People’s Republic was founded on an “anti-imperial nationalism” (Friedman 1994), in the current postcolonial world, at a time when most nations are losing territory rather than recover- ing it, China is busily making good its claims on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Spratlys, as well as zealously guarding its border territories.

Uyghur Ethnogenesis and Internal Colonialism

China’s internment of whole populations, beginning, every Uyghur firmly believes that their ancestors were the indigenous peoples of the Tarim basin, now known as Xinjiang. The Uyghur were recognized as a nationality in the 1930s in Xinjiang, under a Soviet-influenced policy of national recognition that contributed to a widespread acceptance of the continuity with the ancient Uyghur kingdom and their eventual “ethnogenesis” as a bona fide nationality. While rebellions by Yabgu Bug in the late 19th centu- ry, and the short-lived establishments of the Eastern Turkestan Republic (TIRE) in Khashgar in 1933 and Yingin in 1944, indicated Uyghur attachment to the heritage of extending Chinese colonial- ism, these efforts failed just as those of the Uzbeks and Tajiks in Caziat and Soviet Central Asia.

“Minoritization” of the Uyghur became objectified when they were recognized by the Chi- nese state in 1950 as the Uyghur nationality, and the region was recognized by the Chinese as the Autonomous Region in 1956. Chinese practices of ‘integration through immigration’ has meant the in-migration of Han Chinese since the 1950s, with populations increasing from an esti- mated 5 percent in 1940 to 38 percent in 1990. They then become known not as an indigenous people, but as a nationality in lands they once called their own. Through initial occupation, gradual integration through immigration, and finally ‘minoritization’ as a category defined by the state, the Uyghur (and perhaps many others like them) have been internally colonized by the Chinese state.

Internal Colonialism and China’s Uyghur Muslim Minority

The Uyghur are one of ten mainly Musli- m nationalities in China. They are one of 55 minority nationalities in China, with a documented population of 7.2 million in 1990 in Xinjiang alone. The Uyghurs are one of ten mainly Musli- m nationalities, with a total Muslim population in China of nearly 20 million. The repatriation of Uighur prisoners from Xinjiang to the international market (with domestic prices) further fits the internal colonialism model (see Dorn, Wrig- gler, Gladney 1997). Finally, the development of the tourist industry in the region as a ‘silk road’ destination follows the lines of touristic development in the minority areas that Oakes (1953) has also analysed as the result of “internal colonial- ism” in the Southwest. The con- structed indigeneity of the Uyghur poses an alternative to Chinese historiographies of the region, which is consonant with ‘internal’ colonizing powers seeking to assert authority in a region not previously their own.

Chinese Nationalism and its Implications for Minorities

After dynamic population growth in recent decades instead China’s ‘national unity’, official reports have recently detailed Tibetan and Muslim ‘nationalities’ in conflicts in the borders regions of Xinjiang, Tibet, Xinjiang, Ningxia, and Inner Mongolia. With the March 7, 1997 bus bombings in Bei- jing, widely attributed (though never verified) to Uighur separatists, Beijing can no longer keep them secret. The Yining (Ghaluj) uprising from February 2-7, 1997 that left at least twenty- five dead and hundreds injured and arrest- ed, has been heavily covered by the state’s media. This distinguishes the last few events from on-going problems in the region in the 1970-1980s that have previously met with little media coverage.

The government responded with a host of random arrests and new policy announce- ments. In Spring 1998, the National Peoples Congress passed a New Criminal Law that defined “counter-nationalist acts” to be crimes against the state, liable to severe prison terms and even execution. Included in such crimes against the state were acts committed “in order to Urumqi bus bombings on the day of Deng Xiaoping’s” 1997 memorial on February 25 (killing nine people). Beijing is now keeping these secret. The Yining (Ghaluj) uprising from February 2-7, 1997 that left at least twenty-five dead and hundreds injured and arrest- ed, has been heavily covered by the state’s media. This distinguishes the last few events from on-going problems in the region in the 1970-1980s that have previously met with little media coverage.

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