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Genocidal processes: social death in Xinjiang

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ABSTRACT

Genocide is a series of long-term processes emerging from “states of emergency” to convert targeted groups and secure the nation. This paper builds on Critical Genocide Studies literature to historically contextualize China’s “fusion” policy, a narrative of emergency officially explaining extra-legal internment camps and inter-generational separation in Xinjiang. Although China’s policymakers traditionally frame “one-nation-one-state thinking” as Western colonialism, critical approaches to Chinese politics show the party-state frames ethnic identities through colonial binaries of backward/modern and savagery/civilization. How does the party-state’s “historic mission” to overcome colonial “humiliation” promote colonialism? The paper analyses how routine, dehumanizing official narratives of identity and danger enable genocides, conceptualized as planned processes of social death by attrition. It argues that contemporary “fusion” policy interweaves cultural superiority and ethnocentric developmentalism, seeking to resolve China’s “ethnic problem” and decolonize Xinjiang through social death of Turkic Muslims.

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KEYWORDS Ethnicity; genocide; China; Xinjiang; Uyghurs; security

Introduction

China’s policymakers traditionally frame “one-nation-one-state thinking” as Western colonialism and ethno-nationalism.¹ Yet critical approaches to China’s ethnic politics² and literature on identities in Xinjiang³ show how colonial narrative binaries of backward/modern and savagery/civilization are not peculiarly Western. Similarly, comparative approaches analyse comparable violence against minorities in postcolonial societies.⁴ Nevertheless, China’s ethnic policy scholars framed fixed identity boundaries between Western nationalism and Chinese civilization⁵ to argue that ethnic theory must be Sinicized to resolve China’s “ethnic problem”.⁶ Xi Jinping’s⁷

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subsequent declaration that “cultural identity” is the “soul of every *minzu*”⁸ confirmed China’s ethnic policy shift from nominal cultural pluralism to “fusion” (*jiaorong*), an assimilation model.⁹ How does the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) “historic mission” to overcome colonial “humiliation” promote colonialism? The paper shows how “fusion” interweaves colonial and nationalist thought in “semantic hybridity”,¹⁰ securing China’s “Great Revival” by resolving the “ethnic problem” of Turkic-speaking Muslims.

Genocide is a process, not an event,¹¹ emerging from perpetual “states of emergency” to convert barbarians for civilization’s survival.¹² This paper historicizes “fusion”, a narrative of emergency in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), which explains practices of extra-legal internment, inter-generational separation, forced labour, and forced sterilization.¹³ The term “genocidal practices”, analytically distinct from legal conceptualizations,¹⁴ builds on new directions in genocide studies.¹⁵ Genocide emerges from gradual assertions of power to reorganize identities considered superfluous or threatening in long-term ethnocentric narratives, rather than rapid, irrational descents into barbarism.¹⁶ In official Chinese narratives, the Han majority are imagined as a continuation of 2,000-year-old military settlements in Xinjiang, whose “settler culture” and teleological “function” as “embodiment of China’s active spirit” secure and “settle the frontier” (*tunken shubian*).¹⁷ Fei Xiaotong, China’s most celebrated social scientist and key influence on official historiography, narrates China’s historical formation through expansion of Han armies and “barbarians” “attraction” to China’s superior civilization as “new blood for the Hans”.¹⁸ In official narratives, these older imperial desires to attract and “Sinicise” (*jiaohua*) barbarians interweave with resistance to colonialism, perplexing Anglophone audiences drawing from canonical genocide cases.

Long-term state violence in Xinjiang reflects different elements of Feierstein’s four types of genocide: constituent, colonial, postcolonial, and reorganizing.¹⁹ Post-1949 state violence “destroys ideologically unacceptable populations”, from armed Kazakhs dismissed in the 1950s as “bandits” after skirmishes with Chinese troops following “peaceful liberation”²⁰ to twenty-first century “ideological viruses”.²¹ Land seizures, coerced labour, and extra-legal treatment of Xinjiang’s Indigenous peoples resemble older colonial genocides,²² “to rid a territory of Indigenous inhabitants and appropriate it”, stigmatizing them as outsiders and undeveloped “savages who ought to make way for civilisation”.²³ The intent of state-run paramilitary organization, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (*Bingtuan*), to “turn pastureland into collective farms” with “gun in one hand and plough in other”,²⁴ sparked food shortages and mass Kazakh migration to the Soviet Union (1959–1962).²⁵ Today, the party-state targets local populations for “re-education” and “fusion” in internment camps and forced labour in *ongoing* postcolonial independence movements against “Westernisation” and local “separatism”, described by Xi as interlinked, intensifying “long-term struggles”.²⁶ Since 1949, policy has fluctuated, defying

mechanical explanation but state violence is enabled by long-term dehumanization of non-Chinese peoples on PRC territory.

Critical Genocide studies²⁷ historicizes contemporary genocidal practices, unpacking case-specific context while identifying common themes linking broad conditions promoting group annihilation and policy creating those conditions.²⁸ Dehumanization of Xinjiang's Turkic Muslims is complex because China is postcolonial with reference to its own imperial past in Central Asia and in relations with Europe.²⁹ The idea of China as unified nation and state, emerged through intertwined political anxieties about internal Manchu dominance and external European colonialism. Sun Yat-Sen strove to "restore the Han" and save China from networks of corrupt Manchu and Western imperialists.³⁰ Mao Zedong vilified GMD ministries as "counting houses of our foreign masters", threatening China's survival.³¹ Today, perpetual emergency narratives persist in ubiquitous slogans: "without the CCP, there can be no new China". The CCP identifies "hostile foreign forces" and domestic "backwardness" as intertwined perpetual threats, describing Turkic identities as "historical leftovers" of nineteenth century European "colonial manipulation", threatening to dismember China by running against the "flow of history" and the Great Revival's "sacred mission".³² Xi's signature slogan, "never forget our original mission, continue our progress" captures the long-term intent of ethnic policy and explains internment camps as eliminating inauthentic "colonial" identities hindering China's mission.³³ The party-state narrates internment camps and inter-generational separation, typical genocidal practices, as securing China from terrorism and colonialism.³⁴

This paper focuses on how routinized, dehumanizing official narratives of identity transformation enable genocidal processes. The first section conceptualizes genocide as planned, permissive processes of social death by attrition, enabled by narratives of existential need for reorganization of identity. Section two historicizes "fusion" policy in long-term official narratives on state power and ethnicity, which frame Xinjiang's peoples as culturally inferior, existential threats. The final section analyses implementation and impact of "fusion" in "re-education" camps and state-run "boarding facilities" for children, depicted by Indigenous artists as daily, felt experiences of social death. The paper's core argument is that "fusion" interweaves cultural superiority and developmentalism, framing planned social death of Turkic Muslim identities as decolonization and modernization of Xinjiang with Chinese traditions. This resolution to China's "ethnic problem" reflects cyclical human tragedies of state violence to counter violence, irreducible to evil states or cultures.³⁵

Section 1: Genocidal processes

This section theorizes genocide as planned and permissive processes of social death by attrition. Destruction of the "essential foundations of a group's life"

depends on co-ordinated state plans to categorize groups according to contribution to political goals.³⁶ However, “most foreseeable intolerable harms produced by inexcusable wrongs” to groups are social and diffuse, permitted and enabled, rather than physically enacted by individuals.³⁷ Long-term genocidal practices are neither primarily murderous nor traced to individual culpability.³⁸ Nevertheless, non-specialist usage of “genocide”, the “crime of crimes” in International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda’s (ICTR) prosecution case,³⁹ excludes planned, permissive group destruction, fixated on physical killings *by hand* in death camps. Popular physical conceptions of suffering reflect implicit biological conceptualizations of identity, de-escalating the urgency of gradual deprivation of essential life conditions. Critical Genocide Studies shows that by “always looking for Birkenau”, biases towards traditional interpretations of canonical cases inhibit detection and understanding of new genocidal practices.⁴⁰ One in five German Jews died in the Warsaw Ghetto before 1942 deportations or “final solution”.⁴¹ Until the publication of official sterilization documents in Xinjiang, Turkic peoples’ claims of genocide were overlooked across the social sciences. Focusing on physical outcomes and legal definitions reflects twentieth century state-centric geopolitics, overlooking threats to stateless peoples and depoliticizing state-violence unless state sovereignty is violated.⁴² Instead, framing genocide as social death enables analysis of nonlinear genocidal processes that reorganize social relations and identity.⁴³

Genocide scholars agree “the word is new, the crime ancient” when describing annihilation of Melos (fifth-century BCE) and Carthage (146 BCE).⁴⁴ Genghis Khan’s thirteenth century genocides integrated Western Xia territory into the Mongol empire, while eighteenth century Manchu expansion incorporated eastern Turkestan into China, annihilating surrendering Zunghars and renaming the territory, Xinjiang (“new frontier”).⁴⁵ However, genocides are neither mechanical nor have all predictors been catalogued.⁴⁶ Arendt’s “total domination” in concentration camps referred to deprivation of group social vitality, not predictable, machine-like order.⁴⁷ Genocides are socially enacted, driven by connected and disconnected individuals and institutions, mechanistic in identifying peoples as threats yet often chaotically implemented. Stanton’s “eight stages of genocide”, defined through the UN Genocide Convention (UNCG),⁴⁸ begins with “us and them” classification and dehumanization, culminating in extermination.⁴⁹ Fein’s “genocide by attrition” proceeds in five stages (identification, rights-stripping, segregation, isolation, and concentration).⁵⁰ Nevertheless, different relations between variables make genocides non-linear, with Kuper’s famous conclusion that a theory of genocide is impossible informing Semelin’s study of how historical context shapes implementation.⁵¹

Genocide is often interpreted in international law as mass killings with intent to physically destroy groups, preserving “the body of the group but

allowing its very soul to be destroyed".⁵² Lemkin coined the genocide term to capture its cultural intent and effect, yet engineered weakening of targeted groups' social practices is often dismissed as inevitable effects of modernization or cultural diffusion. Such politically dominant perspectives overlook how anthropologists and Indigenous peoples conceive group maintenance through social practices, reducing people to identity-less bodies.⁵³ Social death, Claudia Card's term, builds on how social practices constitute groups as groups, structuring and giving meaning to individuals' lives. Physical death is not necessarily worse than "intolerable harms" of language loss, trauma, and disconnection from community, therefore mass killings are inessential to deprive groups of vitality and reproductive capacities.⁵⁴

Describing German occupation across Europe, Lemkin explained, "genocide does not necessarily mean immediate destruction of a nation" but refers to "coordinated plans of different actions aiming at destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups".⁵⁵ Genocide predates industrialization and exterminatory racism was never a necessary component of Fascism but German fascism industrialized genocide.⁵⁶ Following Lemkin's lobbying, initial UNCG drafts included cultural dimensions but UN debates concluded they could not be included alongside biological annihilation, "mass murders in gas chambers", and industrialized total war.⁵⁷ Genocide's meaning was a negotiated compromise in inter-state negotiations amidst total war. Nevertheless, convention drafters described cultural genocide as legitimate and it plays a subsidiary role in the detection of group destruction in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, qualifying as war crimes and crimes against humanity. The International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and ICTR found individuals guilty of genocide based on small-scale acts in contexts of broader genocidal intent and practices to "destroy, in whole or in part" national, ethnic, or religious groups.⁵⁸ The UNCG's focus on intent acknowledges cultural dimensions and that physical destruction is inessential because, unlike homicide, genocide does not refer to perpetrators' success.⁵⁹

Contemporary Genocide Studies reinvigorated Lemkin's theory of genocide as cultural, problematizing quantifying outcomes based on biological-racial survival.⁶⁰ The UNCG's definition of group destruction "in whole or in part", based on Lemkin's conceptualization, is often assumed to refer to quantities of killings but Card shows how "in part" referred to "part" of a group's essential foundations, including language, religion, and child-rearing.⁶¹ Therefore, removal of Uyghur language as medium of instruction in 2004 represents destruction of group capacity to reproduce its cultural foundations.⁶² Genocidal processes emerge in postcolonial societies, including Thailand and Indonesia, where identification and targeting of internal enemies are elite-led state-building processes.⁶³ Identifying these processes' emergence in pre-existing asymmetrical ethnic relations, supported by official narratives of

dehumanization and transformation, helps detect genocide by attrition prior to mass violence and when it does not include mass killings.⁶⁴ Early warning indicators in Xinjiang include the CCP's 1950 decision to enlist Xinjiang's Muslims before they must "give up religion".⁶⁵

Critical Genocide Studies critiques "sociologically inadequate" dominant understandings of genocide as rapid, mass killings.⁶⁶ Going further, these physical framings enable genocides by recirculating biological conceptions of groups, de-escalating the moral urgency of gradual deprivation of identities and social vitality. The implications of language eradication and economic exclusion of minorities and Indigenous peoples in democratic states relegated these practices to cultural genocide at the Genocide Convention deliberations.⁶⁷ The UNGC debates enabled genocide by attrition of Indigenous peoples as *only* cultural or value-neutral modernization, tragically recycling German Fascism's biological-racial conceptualization of groups that these deliberations were to prevent.

Genocides are never singular outbursts of irrational, quantifiable harm. Empirical evidence from Cambodia, Warsaw ghetto, and Sudan, show how genocides are complex, long-term processes of cultural annihilation, not "directly murderous events" "tracked back to individual culpability".⁶⁸ Dualistic separation of physical and social is reinforced by centring mass killings while exempting gradual genocides, which are neither peculiarly Western nor modern. Genocides unfold gradually in many forms, justified using different logics embedded in different social contexts, but cause intolerable harm, qualitatively experienced as social death. Subsequent sections analyse how official narratives on China's ethnic politics enable genocidal processes and social death.

Section 2: "Fusion" as social death

This section historicizes contemporary CCP "fusion" policies, specifically how narratives of China's historic "ethnic problem" (*minzu wenti*) shape inclusion and exclusion of Turkic-speaking Muslims. PRC policymakers and anthropologists have debated "fusion" narratives since the 1950s. However, "fusion" emerged as explicit policy from the first Xinjiang Working Group Meetings, responding to Han-Uyghur violence in 2009, with Hu Jintao declaring "contact, communication, fusion" as party policy to end "relentless struggle with Xinjiang's separatist forces" and resolve the "ethnic problem".⁶⁹ Xi has maintained a narrative emphasis on "long-term security", "fusion", and "leap-frog development" in the party-state's "glorious mission" in Xinjiang: "settling the frontier is China's millennia-long historical inheritance to develop and defend the frontier".⁷⁰ However, explicit "Sinicisation of religion" policy and Xi's "furnace" metaphor to "fuse every *minzu*"⁷¹ de-emphasizes contact and communication in favour of "fusion", even reversing the ubiquitous "plurality

and unity" (*duoyuan yiti*) concept to assert China's cultural unity.⁷² James Leibold argues Xi's narrative of "cultural identity" as "soul of every *minzu*" reoriented policy from "ethnocultural heterogeneity" to "virulent" "cultural nationalism".⁷³ However, our analysis historicizes how "fusion" reflects gradual shifts from *nominal* cultural pluralism towards explicit assimilation to resolve the "ethnic problem" in China's ethnic policy since 1949.

Xi Jinping⁷⁴ and public intellectuals⁷⁵ describe "new conditions" of Western decline in a "post-American century" as unparalleled strategic "window of opportunity" to transform international and ethnic relations. "Fusion" policy's timing is explained through a "window of opportunity" in a "critical stability period", while the West turns inward and Belt-and-Road-Initiative (BRI) expands.⁷⁶ Throughout perpetual "opening-and-reform" (1978-onwards), Stalin's 1931 slogan, "backward nations get beaten", has been reformulated by public intellectuals as nineteenth-century resistance against the Manchu and European colonialism, explaining twenty-first-century desires to "modernise" and secure China.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, these explanations of "fusion" are embedded in narratives of China's unbroken "settler culture" and its frontiers' "ethnic problem".

Following Manchu imperial expansion into "barbarian"-populated "Western Regions" (*xiyu*), Eastern Turkestan was renamed "new frontier" (*Xinjiang*) in 1884.⁷⁸ Uyghurs widely reject this naming as colonial, generally preferring "East Turkestan" or "homeland" (*weten*). Nineteenth century imperial debates over whether to permit self-rule described Xinjiang as "barren wasteland".⁷⁹ Mao and Zhou Enlai considered the territory and its peoples as pieces in China's geopolitical "strategic chess game",⁸⁰ with "peaceful liberation" by Chinese troops sparking skirmishes with armed Kazakhs, officially described as "bandits", until the mid-1950s.⁸¹ Mao and Zhou promised "self-determination" (*zijue*) for "every *minzu*"⁸² but after 1949, stressed that "self-determination" under socialism was "reactionary" and regional autonomy (*zizhi*) will maintain territorial control of non-Han regions.⁸³ Party-state narratives and PRC constitution present formal equality of China's 56 *minzu*.⁸⁴ However, the *National Law on Regional Autonomy* was designed to ensure minority regions can "never be separated" and is explained through binary colonial narratives that minorities must be "modernised" and their "scientific level" raised by the state.⁸⁵

Prior to 2012, the CCP's *nominal* cultural pluralism celebrated diversity but was confined within institution-building and policymaking to promote gradual assimilation. Developmentalist binary identity narratives structured party-state historiography, with policy documents explaining barbarians' willingness to become Chinese because before "liberation" by "advanced" Central Plains, Xinjiang's peoples were "backward" and enslaved in natural "frontier" subsistence.⁸⁶ Trading "simple, uncomplicated assistance", horses, and other natural goods with Han "frontier-builders", who supply "everything

they need for daily living”, integrated barbarians into the “mutually complementary economy” (*jingji hubu*) forming the Chinese people “since ancient times”.⁸⁷ These Han-centric official narratives interweave historical materialism and civilizational superiority, defining Kazakh and Uyghur identity construction by “mode of production” (nomadism or animal husbandry), while the Han’s timeless “active spirit” and “transcendent” “frontier-building culture” (*tunken wenhua*) surpass material origins.⁸⁸ China’s official founding narratives in Xinjiang resemble Roosevelt’s “settler and pioneer” rescuing a “great continent” from “squalid savages” and General Roca’s “virile people” occupying “fertile lands” of “savages” for progress and security.⁸⁹

From 1949 until the Xi-era, official and scholarly consensus was that “one-nation, one-state” thinking contradicts China’s “national conditions” as a non-Western multi-ethnic state.⁹⁰ The party-state described tensions between ethnic and national identity as the “ethnic problem”, resolved by “scientifically” identifying ethnic groups and providing *de jure* equality for all.⁹¹ Historical materialist class consciousness was to end China’s history of “ethnic oppression” and promote “natural” assimilation (*tonghua*).⁹² The explicitly geopolitical lens framing Xinjiang’s position in China shifted as the CCP’s ethnic classification project (*minzu shibie*) reformulated *Zhonghua Minzu* to mean 56 ethnic groups, replacing Liang Qichao’s and Sun Yat-sen’s conceptualization as “Han race” descending from Yellow Emperor.⁹³ The CCP emphasized “scientific Marxism” in its China’s ethnic classification project but used lineage records,⁹⁴ focusing on differentiating majority Han from “non-Han”, termed China’s “odd calculus” of “55 + 1”.⁹⁵ Mao and Zhou’s framing of ethnic relations as geopolitical “strategic chess game” to create safe frontiers between Han China and European empires, considered “great Han chauvinism” and “local minority nationalism” significant obstacles to the state’s goals.⁹⁶ However, Han’s “higher levels” of “political, economic, and cultural development” conferred “special responsibility” to “develop minorities’ economy and culture”.⁹⁷ Deng Xiaoping considered “lingering” discrimination as “haunting” by “bourgeois nationalist thought” and that “the economy is foundation of resolving the *minzu* problem”.⁹⁸ However, his imagined teleological end was *Chinese* identity (*Zhonghua Minzu*). Adopting historical materialism superimposed ethnocentric notions of progress onto China’s imperial binaries (*hua-yi*), rather than decolonizing an imperial past.

Official resolution to the ethnic problem was traditionally framed through narration of China as 56 *minzu* in “plurality and unity” (*duoyuan yiti*) with Han as “centripetal force” (*ningjuli*).⁹⁹ This configuration drew from Fei Xiaotong, LSE-trained structural functionalist, who narrated China’s formation through Han territorial expansion and assimilation of barbarians (“new blood for the Han”).¹⁰⁰ Mongolian anthropologist, Jian Bozan, advised that “fusion” conceals China’s history of “ethnic oppression” and promotes chauvinist assimilation.¹⁰¹ However, official endorsement of Han-centric “fusion” recirculates

chauvinist historiography, associated with Fan Wenlan of the Zhejiang school, which considered Han identity authentic, superior, and continuous since the Qin-Han era (221BCE-220CE), contrasted against minority identities as modern Chinese political constructions.¹⁰² Today, Turkic and Islamic identities are officially described as inauthentic Western “colonial manipulations”.¹⁰³ “Ethnic unity” textbooks in Xinjiang’s schools, universities, and cadre-training, narrate Han as “transcendent *minzu*” and “extinction” (*xiaowang*) of minority languages as progressive, “inevitable outcomes” of “modernisation”.¹⁰⁴ The party-state narrates *Zhonghua Minzu* on terms by which it critiques Western colonialism, by framing Indigenous cultures as teleologically superfluous and cultural annihilation as value-neutral “modernisation”. Nation-building goals of securing territory and transforming identities renders Xinjiang’s Turkic peoples superfluous in the same teleological understanding of history¹⁰⁵ that justified European colonial and fascist genocides.

The twenty-first century CCP re-imagines Xinjiang through 5,000 years of unbroken Chinese civilization and “fusion”, interweaving imperial traditions, European colonial thought, and historical materialism. Mao’s “class struggle” and Hu Jintao’s “scientific development” offered different economic plans but both conceived minority identities as passively superstructural to the economy and that material conditions naturally resolve the “ethnic problem” through gradual assimilation.¹⁰⁶ Jian Bozan described “ethnic extinction” (*minzu xiaowang*) as violent, Western colonization, contrasted against natural cultural fusion (*tonghua*)¹⁰⁷ but *xiaowang* and Cultural Revolution-era slogans, including “only if *minzu* exists can there be a *minzu* problem”, re-emerged under Hu.¹⁰⁸ Post-2009 “ethnic unity education” textbooks teach that “fusion” (*jiaorong*) denotes “ethnic extinction” of minorities as “highest stage” of “historical development”.¹⁰⁹ Xi’s thinking builds on long-term Chinese debates and gradual shifts towards assimilation, for example, with “contact, communication, fusion” official policy following the Xinjiang Working Group Meeting in 2010. However, Xi’s ethnic policy is officially celebrated as resolving China’s national “contradictions” by prioritizing state-engineered “fusion”, unity, and security, over diversity and development.¹¹⁰

Following the first Xinjiang Working Group meeting, a “2nd generation” of *minzu* policy scholars were unusually granted an online platform by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission in 2012 to debate sensitive policy matters. They insisted policymakers must resolve contradictions between plurality and unity with “fusion” into *Zhonghua Minzu* or race-state (*guozu*), recommending derecognizing the minority category, abandoning regional autonomy, and Mandarin-medium-only education.¹¹¹ The historical materialist “1st generation” argued that regional autonomy and ethnic equality preserve China’s territorial integrity and ethnicity will naturally disappear with development.¹¹² The “first generation” warned China’s leaders “not to repeat the same mistakes as the West”, framing diversity as Chinese tradition and

fusion as “Han chauvinism”, whilst arguing for gradual assimilation.¹¹³ This state-sponsored platform recirculated the logics of China’s Republican-era debates between reformers and revolutionaries on assimilation or exclusion of the “5 races” in struggles against the Manchu and European imperialism.¹¹⁴ The underlying logics of the 2012 debates was that securing China requires resolving the “ethnic problem” of backward non-Han by enabling or promoting their social death.¹¹⁵

Xi’s 19th Party Congress speeches subsequently de-recognized the ethnic minorities concept, referring only to cadre recruitment but describing a singular *Zhonghua Minzu* forty-three times, collocating with Great Revival in twenty-seven instances.¹¹⁶ *Minzu* now officially refers to *Zhonghua Minzu* and more accurately translates as “Chinese race”. Ma Rong celebrates how Xi’s era “does not emphasise *our* minorities’ special nature or rights”, having “fused into one big family” and “direction of history”.¹¹⁷ Xi’s approach of “collective consciousness”¹¹⁸ drives organic unity (*yiti*) to supersede plurality (*duoyuan*) and transcends “*minzu* discourse”.¹¹⁹ Xi’s “historic” reorganization of identity reinvigorates older imperial traditions that non-Han peoples are “less civilised” and *behind*, not different. Abandoning “Western” *minzu* thinking and derecognizing minorities is framed as reinvigorating imperial traditions of “teaching barbarians to be Chinese” (*jiaohua*) through “attraction”, the opposite of Western assimilation.¹²⁰ *Jiaohua* appears in the camp system’s “transformation education” titles and promotional videos illustrating “vocational training” (learning Mandarin and chanting praise to Xi).¹²¹ The Xinjiang Museum’s 2015 “Uyghur Culture” exhibit (Figure 1) publicly celebrated these binary relations of inferior, disappearing relics being consumed by modern Han “frontier-builders”. The imagined teleological end of “fusion”



Figure 1. “Uyghur Culture”. Exhibit from Xinjiang Regional Museum, 2015. Photograph by the author.

is a non-Western China and the Sinicization of backward frontier barbarians by modernizing Central Plains Han.

Since 1949, genocidal processes interweaving Han-centric “fusion” and “modernisation” have promoted gradual social death of Turkic peoples. “Fusion” physically contains and culturally reconstitutes Uyghurs in teleological progress, as “backward” “historical leftovers”, “colonial manipulations”, and obstacles to the “direction of history”. China’s multi-ethnic regional autonomy system was originally designed to maintain territorial control of frontiers and “modernise” peoples colonized by the Manchu. The CCP’s *gradual* reorientation towards assimilation builds on long-term narratives of “setter culture” and “modernisation” framing shifts to monolingual-medium education in 2004 and “fusion” after 2009. Ma Rong considered this policy necessary for China to reinvigorate its own traditions and “develop into a modernised nation”.¹²² Official texts explained Mandarin is a “transcendent language” communicating “modern information”, unlike Turkic languages, because the Han are a “transcendent group”.¹²³ “Fusion” crystallized during 2012 ethnic policy debates as explicit policy to reorganize identities and save China in a “new era” (*xin shidai*) of global power and domestic insecurity.

Section 3: Social death in Xinjiang

This section analyses the application and impact of “fusion” in Xinjiang, focusing on narrative framings of internment camps and secure “centralised boarding facilities” for children. Following Han-Uyghur violence in 2009 and 2014–2015, camps and inter-generational separation were explained as processes of “modernisation” and “de-extremification” to promote “fusion”. The party-state interpreted inter-ethnic violence through its pre-existing narrative lens that framed Xinjiang’s peoples as “backward” problems. In 2009, Xinjiang’s high-school textbooks taught ethnic unity is built on relations between advanced Han and undeveloped minorities, the basis of “national strength” and China’s Great Revival.¹²⁴ Genocides are often sparked by threatened states¹²⁵ but the referent of security here is politically constructed identity, not material survival, and non-Chinese identity is an existential threat. By “looking for Birkenau”, international media overlooks longer-term narratives of social death described by Indigenous artists and intellectuals, enabling genocidal practices to persist unchallenged as genocide.

“Fusion” policy emerged in party-state meetings on breaking cycles of ethnic violence. Universalized Ethnic Unity education texts explained the violence by reorganizing identity narratives in ways which invisibilized Uyghur history and framed Turkic identities as threats: only “the Three Evils” (separatists, terrorists, and extremists) dispute party-state narratives that Uyghurs are “not a Turkic group” and “not an Islamic group”.¹²⁶ The 2009 mass violence¹²⁷ was described as “zero-sum political struggle of life or death” for China’s

survival against “Three Evils” and “scum of the nation”.¹²⁸ The CCP under Xi attempts to break these cycles and resolve narrative tensions between imperialism, nationalism, and chauvinism, by reconstituting identities through “fusion” to tightly hold Xinjiang’s peoples together “like pomegranate seeds”.¹²⁹ Since 2017, “fusion” includes mass extra-legal internment camps as “Education and Transformation Centres” (*jiaoyu peixun zhongxin*) and inter-generational separation as “children’s rescue care centres” (*ertong jiu zhu guanai baohu zhongxin*). By 2018, scholars extrapolated from official figures, estimating that 1.5 million people have been interned since appointment of regional party-chief, Chen Quanguo and intensification of “de-extremification” in 2015.¹³⁰ The CCP describes internment and inter-generational separation in North America and Australia as settler colonialism but its comparable “fusion” practices as rational responses to Uyghur violence because “happiness is the most important human right”.¹³¹

Commemorating the 2009 violence, Chinese artist, Baidiucao, captured the global phenomena of genocide using Auschwitz gates to “remind the world how evil China’s genocide is” (Figure 2).¹³² *Xinjiang Auschwitz* draws parallels between Xinjiang’s camp system and Nazi concentration camps, collapsing East–West binaries and communicating moral urgency to Anglophone audiences “always looking for Birkenau”. Unlike “ethnic cleansing” in former Yugoslavia or mass killings at Auschwitz, CCP “fusion” desires barbarians’ attraction to China and recognition of their own inauthenticity. Inter-generational separation in secure boarding facilities, described as “loving heart nurseries” and “kindness kindergartens”, raise and educate around 100,000 Uyghur children



Figure 2. Baidiucao (2020) *Xinjiang Auschwitz*.

from a few months old.¹³³ Local government documents explain inter-generational separation helps children of parents “detained in re-education” and those who “work”, “happily grow up under loving care of the Party”.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, Uyghur parents describe how these practices coercively “separate” all families with children “living like orphans” in “jail”.¹³⁵ One Han teacher’s clothing donations appeal described children in “thin, torn, dirty, and smelly clothing”, working in freezing winter classrooms,¹³⁶ while parents engage in seasonal work.¹³⁷ These genocidal practices go “beyond physical annihilation”, using “mechanisms of symbolic enactment” to re-organize social relations and identity for China’s “happiness”.¹³⁸

China’s internment camps target groups’ cultural foundations, irreducible to politicide, counterterrorism, or Islamophobia. XUAR Justice Department Party Secretary, Zhang Yun, explained policies target Uyghurs because at least 30 per cent must be “re-educated” as “extremists” while 70 per cent are vulnerable to “extremism”, linked to “ideological viruses” of Uyghur attachments to language and religion.¹³⁹ *Xinjiang Victims Database* records disappearances and family testimonies, listing most known Uyghur intellectuals and artists: Rahile Dawut for academic research on pre-Islamic shrines, Sanubar Tursun and Abdurehim Heyit for performing folk music, and Adil Mijit, a government arts troupe comedian.¹⁴⁰ Targeting cultural institutions and highly-trained intellectuals for “re-education” and “vocational training” illustrates their goal of re-organizing Uyghur-ness. Eliticide,¹⁴¹ systematic targeting of community figures to prevent resistance to genocides, is well-documented in diaspora art. *Sulu Artco*, an “artist collective raising awareness about disappearing Uyghur artists, intellectuals, and scholars” captured international attention using social-media hashtags, #MeTooUyghur (Figure 3), illustrating the silencing of moderate intellectuals as metaphor for elimination of Uyghur cultural foundations.¹⁴²

Beyond eliticide, “population Data Collection Forms” use AI facial-recognition technology, determining detentions in bureaucratic exercises collating scores by “ethnicity”, “religion”, “holding a passport”, “having foreign contacts”, or “relatives in detention”.¹⁴³ The group is targeted as a group, dividing people as “safe, average, and unsafe”, constituting “average” Uyghurs as potential threats. Administrative classification of detainees defines 3 categories of participants in “terrorist or extremist activities”: those “not serious enough to constitute a crime”, those who “demonstrated willingness to receive training”, and those completing prison sentences but “ordered by people’s courts to receive education”.¹⁴⁴ These categories’ scope is limitless and represent superficial organizational measures that conceal essential principles of arbitrary, extra-legal selection to deprive Xinjiang’s peoples of any “right to rights”.¹⁴⁵

Detainees’ families are ordinarily given no reasons for disappearances. Explanations given to released detainees recorded by XVD are mirrored in



Figure 3. Sulu.art.co (2020) #MeTooUyghur.

official documents leaked by the ICIJ, including extra-legal sentences for “wearing a headscarf” or “bearing more children than permitted”.¹⁴⁶ Reasons given to families publicly campaigning for information about disappeared relatives include: not greeting officials appropriately, not smoking, not watching state television, using *whatsapp* messenger, “contractual requirements” to maintain employment, being born in the 1980s–1990s (“untrustworthy generation”), “staying too long in Kazakhstan” and being exposed to “foreign thought”, “applying for a foreign visa”, and writing letters to gain information about family whereabouts.¹⁴⁷ Official government documents summarize the system’s immediate goals as “de-extremification” and “vocational training”, using Xi’s slogans, “preparing for dangers in advance” and “never forget our original mission”.¹⁴⁸ The system targets Xinjiang’s Indigenous peoples per se by framing innocuous behaviours as “terrorist activities” and threats to China’s “mission” demanding extra-legal detainment.

Isolating and concentrating peoples in camps creates conditions where they exist outside law and no longer belong to community, confirming

“the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible”.¹⁴⁹ Former detainees’ testimonies to US Congress, human rights organizations, journalists, and scholars, describe camp conditions: cramped rooms with no sanitation, beatings and torture for crying or using Uyghur language, poor nutrition, daily renunciations of Islam and praising Xi for food, and multiple gang-rapes by guards as punishment with prisoners forced to watch the violence.¹⁵⁰ Gulzira Auelhan had been “exposed to foreign thought” by staying “too long” in Kazakhstan, testifying how she and detainees, aged 17–72 were kept in rooms with up to 60 people and repeatedly hit with electric batons (“always on the head”) when exceeding two-minute toilet breaks. Surveillance cameras monitor detainees’ behaviour and emotional responses, with crying leading to punishment of 14 hours sitting upright on hard chairs for being “infected with bad thoughts”.¹⁵¹ Amanzhan Seiituly described beatings and solitary confinement for using “wrong words” or being unable to sing the national anthem.¹⁵² These violent performative rituals show Uyghurs “everything is possible”, reversing humiliation through sexual violence against Uyghur bodies as “colonial manipulations” and superfluous objects in China’s “historic mission”.

Uyghur diaspora artists and intellectuals describe the absence of information on family wellbeing as “trauma”. Families know anything is possible, triggering experiences that mirror Indigenous “suicidal despair” “under colonial genocide” and concentration camp survivors’ trauma.¹⁵³ UK-based Uyghur writer, Aziz Isa’s dramatized short film, *Unanswered Telephone Call*, documents his experiences after being denied a visa and telephone access to his grieving mother following his father’s death. Aziz writes, “I had become so powerless that I couldn’t even protect my own right to speak to my own parents, and had no idea whether they were alive or dead”, yet this “still continues”.¹⁵⁴ Aziz describes CCP policy since 1949 as “slow genocide”: “they don’t use machine guns or gas chambers ... they believe they can do *anything* ... the aim is to make you mentally ill”.¹⁵⁵ Uyghur linguist Ablimit Baki’s diaspora narratives project explains how family separation is felt “as trauma, but also as torture”.¹⁵⁶ Yusuf, a UK-based Uyghur described three years of family separation: “not knowing their health and wellbeing is slowly pushing my anxiety to an abyss of depression”. Abdul in Norway, described mental “torture”, asking “what is my crime to be separated from my family?”. Camp survivors and separated relatives experience social death and suffer post-traumatic stress, well-documented humiliation techniques in European genocides.¹⁵⁷ Gulzira Auelhan testified to repeated triggering of experiences of sexual violence when her identity card activates metal detectors across Xinjiang’s public spaces, resulting in automatic police interrogation.¹⁵⁸

Diaspora artist, Yi Xiaocuo considers “not knowing” as “trauma” and provides an online art platform, *Camp Album*, to support separated families.¹⁵⁹

long-term social death, invisibilized by official celebrations of modernization and cultural unity.

Conclusions

This paper showed how genocidal practices in China seek to secure an imagined non-Western, civilizational identity, enabled by narratives on Turkic otherness, backwardness, and threat. CCP “fusion” policy interweaves semantically hybrid Western and Chinese narratives, colonial and anti-colonial, seeking to reverse nineteenth century colonial humiliation in twenty-first century elimination of Xinjiang’s Turkic Muslim identities. Popular understandings of genocide as physical destruction reflect mid-twentieth century biological conceptions of identity, limiting practitioners’ ability to detect and understand new genocides by attrition. Internment camps and inter-generational separation promote social death and “destruction of essential foundations” of Xinjiang’s Turkic peoples by preventing transmission of identity practices.¹⁶¹ Although China Studies effectively critiques assertions of China’s ethnic homogeneity in eurocentric nationalism literature, it is less effective in addressing the implications of ethnocentrism in Xinjiang, partly because camps to isolate peoples are associated with colonial genocides and fascism, outside its traditional knowledge boundaries.

CCP ethnic policy documents explain concrete decision-making through teleological progress towards China’s modernization and “original mission”. The Great Revival’s elimination of ethnic difference blurs historical materialist progress and culturalist romanticism, resembling German Fascism’s paradoxical mission of national progress to revive “great cultural achievements of antiquity” by “radical removal” of “inferior elements” opposed to the state’s philosophy.¹⁶² However, China’s “re-education” camp system practices isolation not expulsion, demanding Uyghur recognition of Han cultural superiority and their own “backwardness”. “Fusion” policy destroys, in part, the foundations of groups’ life, language, religion, and inter-generational cultural transmission, resolving the “ethnic problem” through social death of Turkic Muslims. The trauma of sexual violence, posting of male cadres to sleep with wives of interned men, and sterilization are well-documented in personal testimonies.¹⁶³ These genocidal practices emerge from generations of debate about how to socially organize ethnic identities to enhance China’s state power.

Genocide is always cultural in intent and effect. China’s 2012 ethnic policy debates on resolving the “ethnic problem” with economic development or identity-engineering recycled Republican-era contestations over saving China through assimilation or separation for the “5 races” in Xi’s “new era”. These narratives are consistent with Card’s idea of social death and Feierstein’s conceptualization of genocide as technologies of power to

reconstitute group identities. “Fusion” in Xinjiang’s internment camps aims to transform adults while inter-generational separation prevents cultural transmission of language and religion, framed as security measures against threats of terrorism and backwardness to progress and “happiness”. Former detainees are monitored and families abroad disconnected after leaving the camp system, perpetuating trauma that anything is possible. The camps “teach barbarians to be Chinese” through violent humiliation and “re-education”. “Re-education” and torture in camps cannot attract barbarians or transform identities but prevent their maintenance through trauma and severing intra-ethnic contact.

China’s genocidal “fusion” politics projects global power anxieties (“backward nations get beaten”) inwards onto Xinjiang’s Turkic peoples. The CCP describes Western decline as “window of opportunity”, explaining that mass internment camps will defeat the “foundations of separatism”, Turkic and Islamic identities, “forever”.¹⁶⁴ The party-state’s conceptualization of China has gradually shifted from nominal cultural pluralism (56 *minzu*) to cultural nationalism (*Zhonghua Minzu*) but preserves long-term narratives that non-Han frontiers are cultural and political problems for China. The self-perceived threatened state’s genocidal narratives persisted in plain sight and are now implemented in monolingual-medium education in Inner Mongolia¹⁶⁵ and Hui Muslim communities.¹⁶⁶ Internment camps, used by European settlers to isolate Native Americans and Australian Aboriginal peoples as threats to colonial state-building, seek to convince Xinjiang’s peoples of the paradox that they have always been Chinese *and* culturally behind the Han. The party-state adapts sovereignty, a principle it considers European, to assert China’s right to practice genocide. Disagreements on “fruitful results of de-radicalization measures in Xinjiang” are considered intervention and “disrespect for the modernization process of the Chinese people”.¹⁶⁷ History’s tragic “cyclical order” defies modernist teleological conceptualizations from China and the West, recurring “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce”.¹⁶⁸

Notes

1. Pan (2008).
2. Anand (2019); Barabantseva (2011); Gladney (2004); Schein (2000).
3. Bovingdon (2020); Cliff (2016); Dautcher (2009); Roberts (2020); Smith Finley (2013).
4. Miller (2011).
5. Ma (2007).
6. “Sinicisation of religion” is now official policy. See: Xi (2020).
7. Xi (2019).

8. Official translation of *minzu* changed from “nationality” to “ethnicity” during the 1990s to avoid associations with self-determination. *Minzu* does not entail self-identification and Chinese scholars prefer it left untranslated.
9. Ethnic integration models contrast cultural pluralism (maintenance of difference alongside social inclusion) and assimilation (minorities adopt dominant culture). See: Giddens and Sutton (2017).
10. Chow, Doak, and Fu (2001).
11. Rosenberg (2012).
12. Benjamin (1940).
13. Byler (2021); Murphy and Elimä (2021); Thum (2021); Zenz (2019a, 2019b, 2020).
14. Feierstein (2014).
15. Card (2010); Fein (1997); Hinton (2012); Kingston (2015); Semelin (2007).
16. Feierstein (2014, 1 & 205).
17. See: Yue (2007). Also, see: *Bingtuan Jingshen*, chapter 1. This party-state training manual teaches official Chinese history in Xinjiang.
18. Fei (1988).
19. Feierstein (2014, 46–48).
20. Zhou (1950).
21. Roberts (2018).
22. Smith Finley (2021).
23. Maybury-Lewis (2002).
24. These are standardised slogans on China’s ancient and progressive “settler culture” (*tunken wenhua*). See: State Council (2014a).
25. Benson and Svanberg (1998).
26. Xi (2014).
27. Hinton (2012).
28. Card (2010); Rosenberg (2012).
29. Fiskesjö (2017).
30. Chow, Doak, and Fu (2001, 53); Leibold (2007).
31. Mao (1923, 1926).
32. Ethnic Unity Education Board (EUAB) (2009); Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regional Government (XUAR) (2009).
33. XUAR (2018).
34. State Council (2019a, 2019b); XUAR (2018).
35. Card (2010, 4).
36. Lemkin (1944).
37. Card (2010, 8–9, 16–17).
38. Rosenberg (2012, 20).
39. Clark (2015).
40. Hinton (2012, 11–13); Straus (2007); Moses (2021); Stroehlein (2009).
41. Fein (1997, 14).
42. Bloxham and Moses (2010); Shapiro (1989).
43. Feierstein (2014); Green, MacManus and Venning (2015).
44. Card (2010, 264); Kuper (2011); Lemkin (1944, 79); Maybury-Lewis (2002, 43).
45. Perdue (2005).
46. Cushman (2003, 537).
47. Arendt (2000).
48. United Nations (1948).
49. Stanton (1998).
50. Fein (1979).

51. Kuper (1981, 2011, 101); Semelin (2007).
52. Kingston (2015, 63); Nersessian (2005).
53. Kingston (2015, 63–64); Short (2010).
54. Card (2010, 97 & 284).
55. Lemkin (1944, 79).
56. Kuper (2011, 325).
57. Nersessian (2005).
58. UN (1948) art. 2. See Clark (2015) on how establishing “intent” requires evidence of planning not control.
59. Card (2010, 274).
60. See: Bloxham and Moses (2010); Fein (1997); Rosenberg (2012); Semelin (2007).
61. Card (2010, 296–297).
62. The Xinjiang Ministry of Education announced “Bilingual Education” policy in 2004, denoting adoption of Mandarin as medium-of-instruction, except four hours per-week minority literature studies for non-Han students. See: Schluessel (2007).
63. Miller (2011); Winichakul (1994).
64. Card (2010, 303–304); Fein (1997, 13).
65. CCPC (CCP Central Committee) (1950).
66. Short (2010, 833).
67. Bilsky and Klagsburn (2018).
68. Rosenberg (2012, 20).
69. Hu (2010).
70. State Council (2014b).
71. See: Li (2012).
72. State Council (2014c).
73. Leibold (2019); Xi (2019).
74. Xi (2015, 2017a, 2017b).
75. See: Hu (2012); Zhang (2012).
76. XUAR (2018), section 2.
77. See: Wang (2014, 8); Zhu (2017).
78. Perdue (2005).
79. Millward (2007).
80. Leaders still explain policy and Han behaviour towards Uyghurs through “chess thinking” to maintain control of non-Han frontiers. See: Li (2014).
81. Zhou (1950, 63).
82. Zhou (1949).
83. Clarke (2007); Leibold (2007).
84. PRC Constitution (2004).
85. *Zhonghua Renmingongheguo Minzu Diqiyu Zizhifa* (2001).
86. State Council (2009a, 2009b).
87. State Council (2009a, 6); State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) (2009).
88. SEAC (2009, 2–8, 56–97). *Tunken wenhua* literally translates as “station-troops-to-open-up-wasteland” culture.
89. Maybury-Lewis (2002, 46–48).
90. Pan (2008).
91. PRC Constitution (2004); Fei (1980); Mullaney (2011).
92. Jian (1960).
93. Callahan (2008, 134); Chow, Doak, and Fu (2001, 53); Leibold (2007, 32–33).
94. Fei (1980, 166).

95. Mullaney (2011).
96. Mao (1949); Zhou (1950, 63; 1951).
97. Liu (1954); Mao (1956).
98. Deng (1953).
99. Liu (1954, 118–122); Ma (2018).
100. Fei (1988).
101. Jian (1960, 14 & 19–21).
102. Fan (1954).
103. State Council (2019a), Section 2; XEP (Xinjiang Education Press) (2009).
104. XEP (2009, 91–95).
105. Arendt (1958).
106. Hu (2007).
107. Jian (1960).
108. EUAB (2009, 37); Shijian Bianjibu (Practice – Editorial) (1965).
109. EUAB (2009, 17 & 79).
110. XUAR (2018), Section 2.
111. Hu and Hu (2012); Ma (2012).
112. Shengli (2011); Hao (2012).
113. Shengli (2011); Hao (2012).
114. Chow, Doak, and Fu (2001, 53); Leibold (2007, 30).
115. See: Leibold (2013).
116. Xi (2017a, 2017b).
117. Ma (2018).
118. Xi (2017b).
119. Ma (2018, 121).
120. Ma (2007, 5–7).
121. Xinjiang Victims Database (XVD) (2018); Tursun (2018).
122. Ma (2007, 240–241).
123. XEP (2009, 91–93).
124. MOI (Ministry of Information, Theoretical Department) (2009).
125. Maybury-Lewis (2002, 51).
126. XEP (2009, 55); State Council (2019a), section 1.
127. Armed police distributed wooden truncheons to Han rioters attacking Uyghurs. See: UHRP (2011).
128. XEP (2009, 15).
129. China Daily (2017).
130. Roberts (2018, 246–250); Zenz (2019a).
131. State Council (2019a), section 6.
132. See: <https://camp-album.com/2020/01/30/badiucaos-chilling-images-of-xinjiang-camps/>
133. Zenz (2019b).
134. Hetian Ling Juli (2018); Kashgar Government Public Information Platform (2018).
135. AP (2018).
136. Wang (2019).
137. It is common practice for rural families across China to find seasonal work, leaving children in grandparents' care.
138. Feierstein (2014, 205).
139. Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) (2018).
140. XVD, <https://shahit.biz/eng/>.

141. Pakulski (2016).
142. Camp Album Project (2020).
143. Chin (2019); Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2019).
144. State Council (2019a), Section 5; State Council (2019b), Section 2.
145. Arendt (2000, 450–451).
146. ICIJ (2019).
147. XVD records over 13,000 detainment cases. Reasons listed here draw solely from “exemplary entries”, verified by multiple witnesses and written in detail: <https://shahit.biz/eng/#lists>.
148. *Lingdao Juece Xinxi* (Leader’s Policy News) (2018); State Council (2019a), Section 5; (2019b), preface.
149. Arendt (2000, 36–37, 119).
150. Ayup (2021); Haitiwaji (2021); Bekali (2021); Sidik (2021); HRW (2018); Mauk (2019); Tursun (2021).
151. XVD (2018); Gulzira Auelhan, <https://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=1723>; Auelhan (2021).
152. XVD (2018).
153. Card (2010, 306–307); Maybury-Lewis (2002, 49).
154. Aziz (2018).
155. Interview with Aziz Isa, April 2021.
156. Ablimit (2022).
157. Card (2010, 303–304).
158. XVD (2018).
159. Camp Album Project (2019).
160. Yi (2020).
161. Lemkin (1944, 79–81).
162. Kogon (2006, 3–4).
163. Mauk (2019).
164. XUAR (2018), Section 3.1.
165. Leibold and Roche (2020).
166. Stroup (2019).
167. PRC Embassy, UK (2020).
168. Arendt (1958, 279); Marx (1972).

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