

The Spectre of Insecurity: The CCP's Mass Internment Strategy in Xinjiang

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How do we explain the radical shift in the Chinese Communist Party's policies in the frontier region of Xinjiang, where more than one million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities are now interned in prison-like re-education camps? Based on a close reading of official sources, this article explores the evolution of China's mass internment strategy and the key policy-drivers, institutions, and actors in Xinjiang policy over the last decade. It argues irrational fears of instability and dismemberment are driving the party's unprecedented securitization and transformation strategy, with top party leaders convinced of the failure of ethnic accommodation and of the urgent need for increased inter-ethnic "blending" and "fusion." Under Xi Jinping, Xinjiang has emerged as the party's incubator for a more assertive and coercive form of nation-building and cultural re-engineering. The result is a surface level calm that hides deep social and psychological anxieties while at the same undermining cultural diversity and social trust.

The Communist Party's governance strategy toward the nearly 120 million ethnic minorities living in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has shifted—at times dramatically—during the past seventy years. There has been a gradual yet consistent hardening of policy since the late 1990s, with a renewed focus on nation-building and borderland security. More specifically, the mass incarceration of Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) beginning in early 2017 represents the leading edge of a far more coercive and assimilatory approach to ethnocultural diversity and political loyalty in the PRC.

Shortly after coming to power, Xi Jinping warned of the possibility of a Soviet-style collapse in China, asserting: "The Chinese people fear upheaval, desire stability and hope for world peace."¹ This fear of instability and quest for social harmony is most intensely felt in China's strategic Western borderlands. Here the party-state is penetrating deeper into the lives of its citizens, seeking to forcefully transform their cultures, thoughts, and behavior in hopes of manufacturing what it calls "enduring peace" (长治久安). Any misalignment or resistance, especially on the part of restive groups like the Uyghurs and Tibetans, is viewed as a direct challenge to Xi Jinping's rule and realization of his "China dream." Xi Jinping is now the final arbiter of stability and unity in China.

In this article, I seek to tackle the question of how China arrived at the current situation—with upwards of one million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim minorities held in extrajudicial detention and subject to forced re-education—and where China might go from here. I explore the key policy-drivers, institutions, and actors involved in this radical turn in Xinjiang policy. Political decision-making in the PRC is often a black box; yet we can uncover threads of authoritative information through a close reading of official sources, and then construct a reasonably coherent and plausible narrative of how and why a given policy unfolds and its implications for Chinese society.²

Weiwen: Stoking the flames of ethnic fusion

“Stability maintenance” (*weiwēn*, 维稳) emerged as a key driver behind policy and institutional reform in post-1989 China, gradually reshaping the party’s relationship with its citizens and its tools of governance.³ In the wake of the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the “instability card” was frequently played by both defenders and reformers of China’s contentious ethnic policies.

For many party leaders and public intellectuals, upheavals on the frontier—such as the violent ethnic riots in Lhasa (2008) and in Ürümqi (2009)—are symptomatic of the failure of ethnic accommodation and of the need for a renewed focus on national integration and social cohesion. On the eve of the power transition to Xi Jinping in late 2011, high profile academic Hu Angang joined forces with China’s leading counter-terror expert, Hu Lianhe, to issue a provocative call for a “second generation of ethnic policies.”⁴ They argued China must abandon the USSR’s “hors d’oeuvre style” approach to ethnic issues, with its focus on ethnic identity, rights and autonomy, and instead should adopt a “melting-pot” formula to forge a more cohesive and unified “state-race” (国族).

With the support of influential CCP officials, such as Zhu Weiqun,⁵ then executive director of the United Front Work Department (UFW), a range of opinion-makers called for a scaling back of minority preferences and identities while increasing the pace and intensity of inter-ethnic “contacts, exchanges, and mingling.”⁶ Some commentators privately suggested that China should eliminate its system of regional ethnic autonomy and remove ethnic markers from official government documents and personal identification cards.

The response from moderate officials and ethnic minority cadres was immediate and intense. They warned of “ideological chaos” and the possibility of major social and political unrest if such policies were to be enacted.⁷ Any dramatic shift in policy would unleash a Pandora-like set of contradictions, undermining the cooperation, solidarity, and trust central to mitigating social problems in China’s multiethnic society.

At the Central Ethnic Work Conference in September 2014, Xi Jinping sought to “consolidate thinking” and bring an end to the ethnic policy debate.⁸ He called for confidence in the CCP’s current approach and the need to “unflinchingly walk the correct road of China’s unique solution to the ethnic question.” Yet Xi also made it clear that he was broadly sympathetic with a new orientation: less emphasis on diversity and increased efforts to proactively bind together the people of China.

Unlike his predecessors, Xi Jinping believes economic development on its own will not eliminate ethnic contradictions. Instead, unity must be hammered on a firm spiritual, political, and cultural foundation. “Cultural identity,” Xi is quoted as saying at the Central Ethnic Work Conference, “is the foundation and long-term basis for strengthening the great unity of the Chinese nation; we must build a shared spiritual homeland and energetically foster a shared consciousness of the Chinese nation.”⁹ This concept of “forging a strong sense of collective consciousness for the Chinese nation” (铸牢中华民族共同体意识), which is interpreted as emphasizing shared national identity over narrow ethnic allegiances, was written into the CCP Constitution at the 2017 Nineteenth Party Congress.¹⁰

This involves not only more intensive “inter-ethnic mingling” (民族交融) but also the remolding of minority cultures: “We should not continue with what is rotten,” Xi reportedly stated at the Central Ethnic Work Conference; rather, we should “discard the dross and select

the essence; weed out the chaff to bring forth new roots.”¹¹ During Xi Jinping’s first seven years in power, Xinjiang emerged as the party’s laboratory for assertive nation-building and ethnic re-engineering, driven (I will argue) by irrational fears of instability and dismemberment.

Striking hard in Xinjiang: From two hands to a clenched fist

The scale and intensity of the ethnic rioting in Ürümqi in July 2009 shocked CCP leaders and highlighted the relatively lax regional security profile. In an effort to mollify the large Han community in Xinjiang, the party removed long-term party secretary Wang Lequan in April 2010.¹² His successor, Zhang Chunxian, projected himself as a man of the people, and he spoke, initially at least, about the need for both a “soft- and a hard-handed” (软硬两手) approach to social management—an approach that integrates “stability maintenance work” (维稳工作) with “leap-frog style economic development” (跨越式发展), a pet concept of then General Secretary Hu Jintao. This approach required not only large fiscal transfers from the central government to stimulate economic growth, but also a degree of regional autonomy and flexibility.¹³

Under Zhang Chunxian, regional authorities initiated a staged security build-up, which included not only highly trained SWAT teams (特警) and People’s Armed Police (武警) units in urban areas but also the stationing of at least one uniformed police officer in each rural village. The party believed that the violence that erupted in Ürümqi originated with Uyghur migrants from southern Xinjiang, some of whom—they claimed—had links to overseas jihadist and terrorist organisations.¹⁴

As the party penetrated deeper into Xinjiang society, Uyghur resistance increased. During the first two years of Xi Jinping’s rule, Uyghur militants launched scores of largely uncoordinated attacks on police and government offices in Xinjiang. In October 2013, such violence arrived on the doorsteps of the party center when a Uyghur man drove a car laden with petrol and jihadist slogans along the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing, killing two civilians and injuring forty others.

Xi Jinping apparently responded with anger,¹⁵ and became more directly involved in Xinjiang affairs. At a 19 December 2013 Politburo meeting, Xi announced a new “strategic plan” (战略部署) for Xinjiang work, what the official media called “a major altering of the region’s strategy.”¹⁶ The soft approach had failed, and in its place the party had to strike hard at the root causes of social instability: the “three evil forces” (三股势力) of splittism, extremism, and terrorism.¹⁷

As early as 2012, Xi Jinping stressed that the party must “unwaveringly persist with development and stability [in Xinjiang] and ensure that both hands are firm.” This required the “placing of stability above all else” (稳定压倒一切),¹⁸ a position that many hard-line regional experts, such as Pan Zhiping, Ma Pinyan, and Li Xiaoxia, had long been advocating. Even before the Ürümqi riots, Ma Pinyan in Ürümqi and Hu Lianhe in Beijing warned of the dangers of religious extremism to social stability in Xinjiang.¹⁹ Under Xi, their voices were amplified, and leap-frog development quietly faded from party-speak and was replaced by Xi Jinping’s new call for “social stability and enduring peace” (社会稳定和长治久安) as the desired endgame in Xinjiang.²⁰

Institutionally, Xi Jinping strengthened his grip over the region through the creation of the National Security Commission (NSC) in November 2013, which placed the party's powerful Central Political and Legal Commission (CPLC) under the NSC.²¹ As chairman of the NSC, Xi Jinping is now directly in charge of domestic and international security. At about the same time, Xi placed former head of the CPLC, Zhou Yongkang, under investigation for abuse of power and corruption, thereby beginning a process of peeling back Zhou's deep patronage network in the region while also weakening the authority of his protégé Zhang Chunxian.

Similarly, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) and the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), two institutional strongholds for a softer, more accommodationist approach to ethnic governance, were downgraded, and in March 2018 they were placed under the direct supervision of the party's United Front Work Department,²² where ethnic policy reformers like Hu Lianhe (now deputy head of the UFWD's Xinjiang bureau) have more influence over policy formation at the central level.²³

In the XUAR, Zhang Chunxian responded by pushing further into southern Xinjiang. In February 2014, he announced a new plan to rotate 200,000 mid-level party cadres into rural villages over the following three years.²⁴ The campaign was officially known as the “explore the people's conditions; benefit the people's livelihood; and fuse with the people's sentiments” (访民情、惠民生、聚民心), or *fanghuiju* (访惠聚) for short.

Yet, senior party officials—such as then Minister for Public Security Guo Shengkun who toured the region on three occasions in 2014—made it clear that stability work was their top priority,²⁵ with sent-down officials required to carry out “information gathering and intelligence work” (情报信息工作). The goal, according to Zhang Chunxian, was to achieve “complete grassroots coverage and to thoroughly enter and garrison [Xinjiang society] so that there will be no blank spaces.”²⁶

Unsurprisingly, the cycle of violence continued, with Xi Jinping declaring a nationwide anti-terror campaign in April 2014 following the occurrence of further attacks in Kunming and Ürümqi.²⁷ Village-based work teams became frontline soldiers in a “people's war against terrorism,” and they were instructed to visit each household in their respective jurisdictions in order to identify any radical or deviant elements, and then to begin “educational transformation” (教育转化) work.

Under Zhang Chunxian, local officials adopted a perfunctory and targeted approach to “counter-extremism work” (去极端化工作). Take, for example, two local government reports from Yining and Turpan in March 2015. Rusticated cadres and local security personnel identified 3,152 at-risk individuals in Turpan city, and by August 2014 3,087 were declared transformed.²⁸ Similarly, 2,435 individuals were earmarked for re-education in Yining county by October 2014, with claims that nearly 2,400 individuals had been reformed by the end of the year.²⁹

In both cases, the target population was small, representing about 1 percent of the Uyghur population in these two regions. The emphasis was on “one-on-one” (一对一) psychological work during non-agricultural seasons.³⁰ Although in December 2014 Yining county was also experimenting with what it called “drip-feed-style concentrated educational training” (滴灌式集中教育培训), whereby individuals, depending on their perceived level of exposure to

extremism, were subject to between seven and twenty days of collective re-education in the county seat.³¹

At about the same time, however, others were warning that the problems in the XUAR were much more serious. In early 2015, the party secretary of the XUAR Justice Department, Zhang Yun, told *Phoenix News* that 30 percent of the individuals in southern Xinjiang villages were infected with extremist thought and behavior, and they urgently required “concentrated and forceful educational dredging work” (集中力量做教育疏导工作),³² whereas in early 2016 Ürümqi-based sociologist Li Xiaoxia put the number at 20 percent.³³ As the terror attacks continued—with fifty Han miners hacked to death in Aksu prefecture in September 2015—pressures to introduce a new approach mounted.

Zhang Chunxian was finally pushed aside in August 2016 and replaced by Chen Quanguo. Although more closely aligned with former General Secretary Hu Jintao’s *tuanpai* faction, Chen had proven himself to be an ethnic policy innovator and a law and order aficionado during his five years in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. In his 30 August 2016 inaugural speech in Ürümqi, Chen spoke about “placing the maintenance of social stability above all else” and “stretching the foundations” of stability in Xinjiang. *Weiwen* was declared to be “the singular goal” (一个目标) and the responsibility of all cadres and institutions.³⁴

In subsequent months, Chen called for a “clenched fist” (组合拳) in stability maintenance work, and he ordered a massive security build-up, including thousands of new police billets on urban street corners and the dispatch of over a million party cadres into remote villages to “befriend” their minority “kin.”³⁵ Local officials were urged to follow Xi Jinping’s appeal for a “re-mobilization” (再动员) of security efforts and to pre-emptively root out instability in order to achieve substantial results in stability work.

Mass internment: Eliminating “malignant tumors”

The arrival of Chen Quanguo marked a significant turning-point in the party’s Xinjiang strategy. In outlining the six priorities for Xinjiang work, Chen placed *weiwen* at the top of his policy agenda, well ahead of economic development (including the Belt and Road initiative),³⁶ with social stability a necessary “presupposition” (前提) without which all else would be impossible.³⁷ Reflecting a mixture of frustration and hubris, the party decided to abandon its targeted approach to de-radicalization work and to begin planning for a far more ambitious one, what became known as “concentrated transformation through education” (集中教育转化).

Chen spoke about a five-year plan to radically alter Xinjiang society: to stabilize the situation during the first year; to consolidate during the second year; to normalize during the third year; and achieve “comprehensive stability” (全面稳定) within five years.³⁸ Religious extremist thought and behavior were said to be rampant throughout Xinjiang society, like a “malignant tumor” (毒瘤) or a “communicable plague” (瘟疫), thus requiring a more radical and invasive form of cultural and ideological surgery. This necessitated the long-term (yet free, we are told) “hospitalization” of the inflicted, with de-radicalization work shifting from one-on-one, largely non-custodial sessions to institutionalized, full-time internment in purpose-built re-education camps. “If religious extremist thought is not rooted out,” an internal party memo concluded at the time, “violent terrorist acts will continually multiply like cancer cells.”³⁹

Following a 14 February 2017 knife-attack near Hotan, where five civilians were killed by three Uyghur perpetrators, the XUAR Department of Justice issued a directive ordering the establishment of concentrated transformation centers throughout southern Xinjiang.⁴⁰ On the following day Chen Quanguo appeared before a meeting of the NSC in Beijing.⁴¹ The details of the meeting remain secret, yet the new re-education strategy was likely discussed and approved by Xi Jinping. Days later, XUAR security officials held a series of massive military rallies throughout the region. It was time to “load one’s gun and unsheathe one’s sword,” Chen Quanguo told a 27 February rally of ten thousand security personnel in Ürümqi, “we must bury those violent gangsters and terrorists in a people’s war of *tsunami*-like proportion.”⁴²

As the ground thawed in March and April, Department of Justice officials toured southern Xinjiang where the new policy was announced as thousands of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and others Muslim minorities were systematically sent off to re-education camps.⁴³ With the “poison of religious extremist thought” spreading and infecting the vast majority of the masses, in April 2017 a Uyghur party officials told her community that “special times require special educational methods,” as previous efforts had not produced the desired results, meaning “we must adopt concentrated and intensified education.”⁴⁴

Local officials were apparently given quotas and lists regarding how to identify the “sprouts” (苗头) of religious extremism, which included innocuous religious and cultural practices, such as abstaining from alcohol or smoking; covering one’s head with a headscarf, or growing a beard; vilifying bilingual education, or even purchasing dumbbells, boxing gloves, or other strengthening equipment for no apparent reason.⁴⁵ Religious belief was no longer the sole target; instead, anyone exhibiting “abnormal behaviour” (异常活动) was now subject to remolding.

Forensic analysis of government procurement documents and satellite imagery has revealed the scale and nature of this mass internment program. Adrian Zenz estimates that more than 10 percent of the adult Uyghur population, or about one million people, are involuntarily detained without legal recourse in up to 1,200 camps.⁴⁶ These facilities resemble jails, with barbed-wired fences, armed guard towers, locked cells, and sophisticated surveillance equipment.⁴⁷ A handful of escapees have spoken about the coercive nature of camp life, with detainees suffering physical and psychological torture while being forced to denounce their language, culture, and identity.⁴⁸

Muting criticism: “Two-faced individuals” and “fake news”

For nearly a year and a half, the CCP remained tight-lipped about its mass internment strategy. Yet as evidence emerged confirming the existence of the camps, international criticism mounted. In 2018 the U.S. Congress held a number of hearings on China’s repressive policies in Xinjiang; the situation was described as “the largest mass incarceration of a minority population in the world today.”⁴⁹ The forced detention of Uyghurs and others clearly violates both Chinese and international legal protections against arbitrary detention, and represents a return to the previously abolished “re-education through labor” (劳教) system, with labor now apparently replaced by free (or even paid, we are told) “study and training.”⁵⁰

Criticism of party policies in Xinjiang likely emerged as a topic of discussion at the early August 2018 leaders' retreat in Beidaihe, when Xi was apparently on the defensive following a difficult summer of internal criticism.⁵¹ At about that time a decision was taken to change tack and get out in front of the Xinjiang story. At the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on August 13, Hu Lianhe confirmed the existence of the internment program and he sought to justify the party's new approach: the camps, he insisted, are benign "vocational education and employment training centres," where radicalized individuals "acquire employment skills and legal knowledge, with a view to assisting their rehabilitation and reintegration."⁵²

Chen Quanguo was one of the first regional leaders to rally behind Xi Jinping after the Beidaihe retreat. In an 18 August 2018 speech in Ürümqi, Chen echoed Xi's earlier call for the "party center" to remain the sole and supreme decision-making authority.⁵³ The new head of the CPLC, Guo Shengkun, visited Xinjiang in September, followed by UFWD head You Quan in October. They both praised *weiwen* work in the region. "A favorable social stability situation is hard-earned," Guo is quoted as stating. "We must cherish it forever and continue to consolidate it."⁵⁴ Meanwhile, international criticism was dismissed as ill-informed and biased, mere "gossip" according to Foreign Minister Wang Yi.⁵⁵

The XUAR's revised "anti-extremism regulation" retrospectively authorized county-level officials to establish vocational training centres and other transformation methods, and also called for their "legalization, institutionalization, and standardization,"⁵⁶ suggesting the party has no intention of reversing course. The elimination of violent terrorist attacks and the reduction of criminal cases were cited, in a wide-ranging interview with Xinhua on 16 October 2018 by the Chairman of the XUAR Shöhrät Zaki, as evidence of the strategy's success: "We have established a good foundation to completely resolve the deeply rooted problems that affect the long-term stability of the region."⁵⁷

In fact, the party-backed *Global Times* claims these policies are worth emulating,⁵⁸ and the signing of an anti-terrorist cooperation agreement between Xinjiang and Ningxia opens the door to the possible replication of the Xinjiang model elsewhere in China,⁵⁹ and perhaps even overseas in other authoritarian countries.

Despite suggestions that some detainees might "graduate" and return to their former communities, the mass internment policy appears to be here to stay, with recalcitrants held indefinitely and anyone deemed to be suspect (either politically or culturally) sent off for a bout of remolding. "There is still a long way to go for southern Xinjiang to eradicate the environment and the soil of terrorism and religious extremism," Shöhrät Zakir noted.⁶⁰

At present, open resistance in Xinjiang is impossible. Anyone brave enough to speak out, or to suggest a more moderate approach, faces immediate reprisals, with even minor acts of defiance—such as speaking Uyghur in public or exhibiting lackluster performance at weekly flag-raising ceremonies—grounds for detention and re-education. The fear of duplicity haunts authoritarian regimes, and like the Bolsheviks before it, the CCP has launched numerous purges aimed at "tearing off the mask" of double-dealers.⁶¹

In Xinjiang, these "hidden enemies," especially among party members and government cadres, are referred to as "two-faced individuals" (两面人) who "say one thing and do another; do one thing on stage and do another thing off stage; say one thing to one's face and do another behind one's back."⁶² At a 2016 meeting of the Central Discipline Inspection

Committee in Beijing, Xi Jinping condemned two-faced individuals, claiming they were causing grave harm to the party and the people's interest, and he called for them to be "promptly rooted out and eliminated."⁶³

Chen Quanguo has made party loyalty the cornerstone of his securitization and transformation strategy: "First, we must strengthen political discipline and political rules and be absolutely loyal to the party under General Secretary Xi Jinping," he stated in a September 2016 speech after arriving in Xinjiang.⁶⁴ His speeches are filled with sycophantic praise of Xi Jinping, something that helped him secure a Politburo seat at the 2017 Nineteenth Party Congress.

In sharp contrast, in August 2018 the former police commissar of Qiemo county in southern Xinjiang, Alip Tursun, was publically shamed as a typical "two-faced individual."⁶⁵ He not only used his position to seek profit and influence but he also abetted the "three evil forces," acting as a protective "umbrella" for their efforts to evade the law and incite ethnic hatred. According to officials at the Party School in Ürümqi, "two-faced individuals" are moving farther underground in order to conceal their identity and to avoid exposure.⁶⁶ They threaten to smash Xinjiang's hard-earned stability and undermine the image and legitimacy of the party in the eyes of the people.

Duplicity transcends ethnic boundaries, yet the bar for loyalty in Xinjiang is always higher for Uyghur and other minority officials. Han salesman Zhang Haitao was sentenced to nineteen years in prison in 2016 for criticizing party policies in Xinjiang, while Uyghur academic Ilham Tohti received a life sentence for committing the same "crime."⁶⁷ Xi Jinping has stressed that when it comes to ethnic minority cadres, adopting a firm and wide-eyed stance regarding the cardinal questions of right and wrong is of utmost importance.⁶⁸

Even noted dissident voices within China, such as Ai Weiwei, Xu Zhiyong, Woenser, and others, have remained circumspect regarding the party's new radical strategy in Xinjiang, rightfully afraid to speak out because of fears of reprisals. Stoked by racial chauvinism and virulent Islamophobia, the Chinese public is widely supportive of the crackdown in Xinjiang, and even if some liberal elite view the policy as counterproductive or foolhardy, none are willing to publicly voice their opposition to a policy that has the direct imprimatur of Xi Jinping. Beijing-based dissident Hu Jia was one of the few PRC-based critics to openly condemn party policies in Xinjiang when he spoke in defense of his friend Ilham Tohti during a recent VOA interview.⁶⁹

At present, top party officials seem confident of their ability to muffle or quarantine any international criticism. Beijing regularly dismisses foreign media reports on Xinjiang as "fake news" or "slandorous lies,"⁷⁰ with Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hu Chunying claiming these reports are "hearsay" or based on "false or fictional sources."⁷¹ The chief concern of party officials is to create a plausible and palatable counter-narrative (with suitable voices and imagery) for consumption by China's key trading partners in the Muslim world and beyond.

In early 2019, China invited diplomatic and media officials from a range of countries to tour Xinjiang and to visit three "vocational education and training centers." Some of the visitors denied witnessing any signs of repression, including the chargé d'affaires of the Pakistani embassy in China and the editor of Bangladesh's *Daily Sun* newspaper, and some even praised China's counter-terrorism and developmental efforts in Xinjiang.⁷² Any public

opposition in the Muslim world would amplify the pressure on Beijing, yet few global leaders are willing to take on Beijing regarding human rights abuses when the consequences for their own political power and national interests could be dire.

Conclusion: The consequences of fear

By criminalizing diversity/dissent and institutionalizing *weiwen* across Xinjiang society, the CCP has created a false sense of security: a surface level calm that pastes over deeper social and psychological anxieties. The relentless fear of instability undermines social trust and cohesion while generating alienation throughout Chinese society. The result is what Xi Jinping's own PhD supervisor, Qinghua University Professor Sun Liping, calls "social decay" (社会溃败), or "the necrosis of the cells that constitute the body of a society."⁷³

The current situation in Xinjiang typifies what Sun identified as the "phantom of instability" (不稳定幻像) in 2010, whereby the mere perception of instability generates intensive surveillance and securitization which in turn generates more instability. The result is a "vicious cycle of *weiwen*."⁷⁴

Self-corrective efforts can be notoriously difficult in autocratic states like China. The institutional dynamics (a weak civil society, strong top-down controls, and the dangers of risk-taking) render policy U-turns unattractive, as recently argued by Pei Minxin.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the party has incentivized stability maintenance in the cadre promotion process in frontier regions like Xinjiang and Tibet, encouraging local officials to pursue increasingly intrusive and repressive policies aimed at keeping a firm lid on any outbursts of social discontent or political opposition.⁷⁶

This sort of "rigid stability" (刚性稳定), observed Chinese scholar Yu Jianrong in 2012, can function like a "boomerang": "bouncing from the populace directly back to the source of the pressure, i.e., the central authorities," ultimately undermining their political legitimacy while potentially disrupting their rule.⁷⁷

Through its obsessive focus on social stability rather than on the deep inequalities and mistrust existing in Xinjiang society, the Chinese Communist Party is stoking the flames of social decay, atrophying the very cells that comprise the body politics in China. Death may not be immediate, but the terminal nature of the illness seems increasingly certain, as is the irreparable damage to the Uyghur culture and people.



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