

## **“They Just Want to Erase Us”: Triumphant Modernity and Catastrophic Witnessing in Debates About Genocide in Xinjiang**

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Combatting what it calls “radical Islamic extremism,” the Communist Party of China (CPC) has launched a social engineering program in Xinjiang, the western region of China, where more than 1.8 million Uighurs, Kazakhs, Hui, and other non-Han groups—mostly practitioners of Islam and racialized as Muslim—have been imprisoned without due process. Human rights groups are calling this the worst ethnic cleansing since the European Holocaust, but the CPC has claimed the right to clamp down on “terrorists” and “separatists” by “deradicalizing” them in “vocational education and training centers.” Placing this campaign in a historical context, we argue it demonstrates how the CPC is implementing a colonialist version of “triumphant modernity.” To illustrate how activists are responding, we draw on accounts shared by refugees to document “the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing.” This protest rhetoric debunks China’s arguments while advocating for indigenous rights and securing international support. The article builds on the genre of social justice activism within communication scholarship to add new international depth to our efforts to map strategies for advocating for justice.

*Keywords: China, human rights, refugee rhetoric, social justice, Uighurs*

A drone hovers over a train station near Korla, in the western province of China called the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The video shows hundreds of Uighurs (also spelled Uyghurs), their heads and beards shaven, blindfolded and shackled, shuffling away from a train (“Footage Shows,” 2019). Estimated to be as many as 600 prisoners (Rudolph, 2019b), the group is bound for what the Communist Party of China (hereafter CPC) has described as a “vocational education and training center” (CPC [State Council Information Office], 2019b, para. 1). Viewers thus witness the CPC’s counterterrorism efforts in the XUAR, where guilt by association—as determined by ethnicity and religion—has led to the imprisonment of 1.8 million Turkic-speaking Uighurs, Kazakhs, Huis, and other non-Han groups devoted to Islam and steeped in Muslim cultural traditions (Niyaz, 2020; Zenz, 2020). The video offers evidence of mass imprisonment without due process and industrial-level ethnic cleansing. One critic has responded to these images by

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Date submitted: 2022-04-11

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recalling World War II-era footage of the train stations that fed millions of Jews into the Nazi death camps (Apps, 2019). As lamented by Dolkun Isa, the president of the World Uyghur Congress, "It's clear that 'never again' is happening again" (Seytoff, 2019, para. 11).

Contrast that warning with the opening of the 2022 Winter Olympics, when the ceremonial torch-lighting was handled by Dinigeer Yilamujiang, a cross-country skier on China's delegation (Buckley, 2022). Rights activists dubbed the Olympics the "genocide games," and charged Beijing with using Yilamujiang—who grew up in Xinjiang—to practice the "sports washing" of human rights abuses ("The U.S. Boycott," 2021). The Party hoped Yilamujiang's star-turn would show the world how Western media outlets were trying to disrupt the Olympics by spreading "false narratives" about Uighurs in Xinjiang (Rongyi, 2022, para. 1). A cheerful patriot, Yilamujiang told reporters China had done everything it could for her, and how she aspired to "train hard and bring glory to the country" (Lin & Yu, 2022, para. 17). *China Daily* posted a video interview with the athlete to "debunk Western lies" (Zhe & Xu-Pan, 2022). The clip includes footage from the skier's home in Xinjiang, where her mother speaks of being "offended and insulted" by Western media reports depicting genocide: "We are afforded the same rights as other ethnic groups, we are equal," she says (Zhe & Xu-Pan, 2022, 0:01:20). Since the Olympics ended, thousands of such pro-Party videos featuring Uighurs have flooded the Internet, demonstrating how "the Chinese propaganda machine" is taking its arguments online (Steenberg & Seher, 2022, para. 11).

The jarring differences between these two perspectives is a matter of life and death, for while the CPC's Olympic messaging portrays the happy assimilation of Uighurs into a multicultural China, the drone video depicts the mass incarceration of innocent civilians in what media have described as a vast new "gulag" (Akyol, 2019), "indoctrination camps" (Perlez, 2019, para. 2), and "internment camps" (Rudolph, 2019a, para. 1). Some observers have characterized the campaign as "ethnic cleansing" (Eve, 2018), while others call it "cultural genocide" (Leibold, 2019). As scholars, advocates, and witnesses try to make sense of the catastrophe, Orville Schell (2019) argues it exemplifies the People's Republic of China's (hereafter PRC) turn toward "proto-fascism" (para. 4). The claim illustrates concerns about political developments in the PRC under Xi Jinping. From taking aggressive military actions in the South China Sea (Hartnett & Reckard, 2017) to threatening Taiwan (Seligman, 2019), implementing increased cyber surveillance and censorship (Buckley & Mozur, 2019), abolishing presidential term limits (Rauhala, 2018), and trampling on the rights of Hong Kongers (Gilmore, 2020), observers fear that Xi is pushing China toward a neo-Maoist dictatorship ("Colossal Digital Police State," 2019). Within this discourse, the Xinjiang camps serve as evidence of how far the CPC will go to enforce Xi's new authoritarianism.

Residents of the XUAR, supported by an array of international allies, have responded with letters, videos, blog posts, memes, drawings, songs, reports, and other forms of protest. To chronicle one aspect of this social justice activism, we foreground the voices of witnesses protesting against the CPC's genocide. To conceptualize these efforts, we draw on a number of emergent threads within communication scholarship to describe *the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing*, a genre of protest rhetoric depicting colonial occupations as acts of both political brutality and interpersonal humiliation. Focusing on the post-9/11 discourse in the United States, Shereen Yousuf (2020) has noted how "Orientalist logics ensure that Muslims are cast as uniquely susceptible to terrorism due to their 'culture' and 'tradition'" (p. 389). This article expands on that

work by tackling the question of how the once anti-colonial PRC is combining anti-Muslim racism with claims about fighting terrorism with a colonialist project justified in the name of national security.

We open this article with surveys of the political history of the XUAR and the CPC's justifications for its actions; we focus on the Party's arguments about protecting China's national security via a process of forced urbanization we call "triumphant modernity." We then dive into the literature on social justice activism to offer our theory of catastrophic witnessing. With that historical and rhetorical context established, we turn to the frontlines of Xinjiang-based protests, showing how activists are trying to persuade international audiences to support their cause. The conclusion then considers how international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and state actors have responded to the crisis, demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of catastrophic witnessing. Considered as a whole, the article offers a case study of the complicated rhetorical patterns driving international debates about genocide in Xinjiang, thus adding international depth to the communication subgenre of works addressing social justice activism.

### **Xinjiang as a Contested Space**

The region the CPC calls the XUAR has simmered for centuries in political uncertainty, cultural hybridity, and economic liminality (Blum & Jenson, 2002; Jacobs, 2016; Millward, 2007). Still, China's "Strike Hard" campaign in Xinjiang, the precursor to the genocide discussed herein, flows directly back to the Urumqi uprising of 2009, when resentments over economic inequality, racial discrimination, religious persecution, and forced urbanization exploded in a swirl of anger, confusion, and violence ("Can Anyone Hear Us?," 2010). The Party claims the protesters triggered the violence, but observers reported the protesters were peaceful until the CPC's heavy-handed response—which included water cannons, truncheons, tear gas, and live ammunition—escalated the situation (Wong & Yuanxi, 2009). Violence soon engulfed the city, as Han immigrants and local Uighurs attacked each other in street battles that left close to 200 dead, thousands injured, and parts of the city ruined (Cha, 2009). The Party restored order by "imposing curfews, cutting off cellphone and internet services, and sending armed police into neighborhoods" (Wong, 2009, p. A1). One report indicated that 20,000 troops "poured into the city" to implement martial law while "military vans roamed the streets with loudspeakers . . . blar[ing] slogans like 'Maintain Stability' and 'Protect the People'" (Jacobs, 2009, para. 7).

To prevent any repeat of such protests, in 2014 the Party launched a "Strike Hard" campaign. Over the following years, the CPC replaced local languages in school curricula and public signs with Mandarin (Byler, 2019a), banned Islamic wedding rituals and some daily prayers (Hoshur, 2020a, 2020b), outlawed cultural practices such as growing beards and wearing head-scarves ("China Uighurs," 2020), demolished more than 8,000 mosques (Niewenhuis, 2020b), and arrested religious leaders ("Xinjiang Authorities," 2020). The Party thus transformed the historically rich diversity of Xinjiang, once hailed as a feature of regional authenticity, into markers of danger. As James Millward (2019) notes, the "Strike Hard" campaign signaled a dramatic shift from "Qing-style imperial ethno-pluralism," a hands-off approach that celebrated diversity, toward "Han-style nationalistic assimilationism," a hard-edged intervention meant to abolish diversity (section 2, para. 6). Simina Mistreanu (2019) concludes the CPC's program of forced cultural assimilation strives to "erase the culture" of the Uighurs (para. 3). We should be clear that while no observers report mass executions, the CPC's effort to "erase the culture" of the

Uighurs clearly falls within the United Nations' definition of genocide, which results from "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" ("Office on Genocide Prevention," n.d., article II, para. 1).

### **The CPC's Rhetoric of Triumphant Modernity**

The CPC has offered a different narrative, claiming it is responding to "the three evil forces" of "separatism, terrorism, and extremism" ("Security Installed," 2020, para. 3). Facing this challenge, the Party has not built prisons but "vocational education and training centers," which "respect and protect human rights" by defeating "radical Islamic extremists" (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019b, Preface, pp. 1-2). In this telling, the Party's "Strike Hard" campaign is fulfilling "a fundamental task of any responsible government . . . to remove the malignant tumor of terrorism and extremism" (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019b, Preface, p. 2). The Party argues that because of its program, "Xinjiang has been salvaged from the verge of massive turmoil. It has avoided the fate of becoming 'China's Syria' or 'China's Libya'" ("Protecting Peace," 2018). The world may stand aghast, but the CPC is pleased, arguing its work "should be supported" ("Fight Against Terrorism," 2019, para. 1).

The Party has justified its actions via four arguments: (1) they are necessary defenses against meddling foreign forces (Wenting & Yunyi, 2019); (2) the mass-imprisonment program is a logical response to terrorism (Ahmed, 2018); (3) the camps are helping to cleanse the pathological Other of physical illnesses and mental deficiencies (Beydoun, 2018); and (4) China's actions against terrorism and extremism illustrate its status as a responsible global leader defending "civilization" (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019a; Yonghe, 2020). We do not have the space to analyze these arguments in detail but suggest that when considered as a whole, they reproduce a long-standing trope in anti-Muslim racism, which, as Yousuf (2020) argues, depicts Muslims as carriers of "the disease of extremism" (p. 388).

The Party's claims rest on a sweeping act of historical revisionism. In its 2019 white paper, *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang*, the CPC claims the XUAR "has long been an inseparable part of Chinese territory," dating as far back as "202 BC" (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019a, Section 1, p. 1). As noted above, historians have chronicled how governance in the region has waffled across the centuries from regional tribal affiliations to would-be colonizing empires, from states of warlord rivalry to chaos, with the region laced with linguistic, cultural, economic, and religious conflicts. *Historical Matters* sweeps this history away, announcing that since the Han dynasty, the inhabitants of Xinjiang have "had a strong sense of national identity and acknowledged themselves as branches or vassals" of the imperial powers ruling China (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019a, Section 1, p. 3). This revisionism claims the people of Xinjiang "are members of the same big family . . . . The ethnic groups in Xinjiang are like brothers and sisters . . . [who] guard against foreign aggression, oppose separatist activities, and safeguard national unification" (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019a, Section 3, p. 2). In this telling, the citizens of Xinjiang are now, and for centuries have been, pulling along in harmony with China; like all good patriots, they are "striving to achieve" what President Xi calls "the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation" (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019a, Conclusion, p. 1).

In contrast to this vision of national harmony, another Party white paper, *Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang* (2019b), acknowledges the XUAR “has been plagued by terrorism and religious extremism,” which is why the Party has launched its “education and training” centers (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019b, Section 1, pp. 1–2). While the first white paper portrays Xinjiang’s Muslim communities as happy brothers and sisters embracing the “China Dream,” this report depicts a region pervaded by sickness, as indicated in such terms as “plagued,” “malignant tumor,” and the claim that Xinjiang’s troublemakers’ “minds have been poisoned” (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019b, Section 1, p. 2; see Wang, 2018). Invoking language usually reserved for pro-Tibet activists, the report warns these “separatists, religious extremists, and terrorists” are trying “to split China” (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019b, Section 1, p. 1).

To counter this threat, the report announces the Party’s “vocational education and training” centers will “respect and protect human rights” by “helping the trainees to emancipate their minds” (CPC [State Council Information Office], 2019b, Section 4, p. 1). The CPC promises these mind-cleansing facilities are reserved for those who have “been convicted of unlawful and criminal acts involving terrorism and religious extremism” (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019b, Section 4, p. 1). We thus encounter a confusion: Are these education and training centers meant to help the Uighurs modernize their job skills, or are they prisons housing those convicted of engaging in terrorism, or are they laboratories for “emancipating” the minds of those “poisoned” with the disease of Islam? As this report makes clear, the CPC sees these functions as intimately connected. Indeed, the Party announces that the purpose of the facilities is to “encourage adaptation to the requirements of modern society in terms of food, clothing, housing, transport, weddings, funerals, etiquette and customs. The centers vigorously spread the concept of modern civilization” (CPC (State Council Information Office), 2019b, Section 5, p. 2).

By seeking to transform virtually all aspects of daily life in Xinjiang, the camps amount to nothing less than time machines: They are meant to consume allegedly premodern, culturally backward, regionally identified, and devout Muslims and to transform them into modern, progressive, nationally identified, healthy and secular Chinese Dreamers (see Zenz, 2018). Indeed, the leaked “China Cables” published by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists indicate how the camps seek “the cultivation of manners” regarding “daily life, health, etiquette . . . civility and courtesy, compliance and obedience” (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2019, para. 41). The transformations are virtually religious, as camp internees are expected to “repent and confess . . . the illegal, criminal, and dangerous nature of their past behavior” (Byler, 2019b, point 11). Clearly not training in upward social mobility or civic engagement, the camps offer Party-mandated training in “new forms of submission” (Byler, 2019b, point 12). As summarized by a lawyer for the World Uighur Congress, these social-engineering efforts strive for “a total transformation designed to wipe the Muslim Uighurs as a separate cultural group off the face of the Earth” (“Data Leak Reveals,” 2019, final para.).

In this way, the CPC’s project in Xinjiang—reproducing what it has done in Tibet—illustrates the devastating consequences of what Hartnett (2013) calls “the patriotic rhetoric of communist modernity” (p. 288). This is a communist version of colonialism in which local cultures are obliterated under waves of state-controlled urban development and forced “re-education,” all waged in the name of modernizing the backward, “liberating” infected minds from superstition, and smothering regional identities in the uplifting

national promises of the “China Dream” (see Hartnett, 2017). Religion is taboo in China yet this forced assimilation offers a narrative of total transformation, even salvation, at the hands of communist modernity. The claims justifying these moves are so self-satisfied, so bathed in glory, that Patrick Shaou-Whea Dodge and Lisa B. Keränen (2018) have called the process “triumphant modernity,” indicating how the Party’s patriotic rhetoric implies a sense of victory over some defeated Other. The CPC trumpets this forced modernization as patriotic and heroic, yet as Wang Hui (2011) has noted, the “developmentalism” driving this process is steeped in “domination and subordination” (p. 95; see Becquelin, 2004). Indeed, rather than leading to multiethnic assimilation rooted in economic and political equality, the imposition of triumphant modernity in Xinjiang has left the Uighurs as “arguably one of the most segregated ethnic minorities in the world” (Leibold & Deng, 2015, p. 122). As the Uighur Human Rights Project reports, the CPC’s triumphant modernity in the XUAR amounts to a “campaign of systematic cultural genocide” (Drexel, 2020, para. 3).

### **The Rhetoric of Catastrophic Witnessing**

Because the Party has restricted journalists from entering Xinjiang, and because local activists languish in “reeducation centers,” the consequences of triumphant modernity have unfolded largely behind the “great firewall” of censorship. Snippets of news emerge, such as the drone video with which we opened this article, but most of what we know about events in the XUAR is shared by exiles and refugees—and many of them, fearing retribution against friends and families, speak only on the condition of anonymity. Like scholars and journalists from around the world, our own efforts to conduct interviews in Xinjiang were stymied by a combination of COVID-imposed travel restrictions and Party-imposed bans. Because of this communication dynamic, “too little is known” about the crisis from the Uighurs’ or Kazakhs’ perspectives, meaning, as Nick Holdstock (2019) notes, “often we are just guessing” about both the personal details and catastrophic scope of events in the XUAR (p. 237). To redress that lack of information, we turn below to the voices of witnesses sharing first-hand evidence. Their stories contribute to an emerging genre of protest discourse we call “the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing.”

Feeding off earlier work addressing U.S. responses to slavery, European replies to the Holocaust, and postcolonial and indigenous critiques of genocide, scholars from multiple disciplines have written about the power of first-hand testimonies to unsettle enforced silences and mass-produced propaganda (Craps, 2013; Flynn & Allen, 2020). For example, Michelle Holling (2014) works with local activist groups to share testimonies about violence against women in Ciudad Juárez. Karina Horsti (2019) writes about artistic renderings of the immigration crisis in Europe. Miranda J. Brady (2013) mobilizes the testimonies of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis witnesses to the transfer of Aboriginal children into Canada’s Indian Residence Schools. As Adriana Spahr (2018) argues in her work about the Argentinian “dirty war,” what unites this range of witnessing is the attempt “to break the spell” of silence and “to remove the blindfold” from those forced into not seeing (p. 33). More than just breaking through silences, Elizabeth A. Flynn and Ira J. Allen (2020) foreground the community-building aspects of such work, arguing “bearing witness is rhetorical action in search of a shared world” (p. 369).

Across these studies, the central methodological commitment is to work with and alongside endangered communities, creating spaces for their voices to cut through state propaganda while building a sense of solidarity. In the case of the XUAR, this means the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing is not

about jockeying for power within established judicial branches or cultivating allies to support already existing civic institutions—for in Xinjiang, those civic engagement options are not available. Rather, the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing amounts to cries in the wilderness and desperate pleas for recognition and acknowledgment against terrible odds. Such rhetoric includes two key characteristics. First, because it works from spaces that have been colonized, where state propaganda monopolizes media representations, witnesses subscribe to what Yvonne Slosarski (2016) calls “a faith in the transformational power of truth-knowledge” (p. 255). Because their oppression is based on regimes of disinformation, where atrocities are shrouded in euphemisms and spectacles, the practitioners of catastrophic witnessing addressed below hope sharing their stories and telling their truths will create cracks in the edifice of silence. This “faith” in the power of truth-knowledge privileges storytelling and sharing experiences; it points to unadorned rhetoric. Second, because the victims of “triumphant modernity” are largely forbidden from public spaces and excluded from formal deliberative bodies, their protest rhetoric tends to come from domestic experiences. Similar to the experiences of women in Argentina who opposed International Monetary Fund impositions by marching in the streets while banging pots and pans, hence mobilizing the tools of domestic labor for political protest (Eltantawy, 2008), catastrophic witnessing from the XUAR tends to focus on how triumphant modernity has drilled down to impact such domestic matters as companionship, dress, food, and worship habits.

The protest rhetoric considered below therefore tends to eschew layered analyses of the infrastructure of oppression, instead offering personal shouts of injury and testimonials about damaged daily life. As Bradford Vivian (2017) argues in *Commonplace Witnessing*, by sharing these embodied experiences, such figures “attain especial authority not only as witnesses to atrocity, but also as de facto moral spokespersons on behalf of humankind” (p. 23). Indeed, the Uighur and Kazakh refugees we discuss portray China’s “triumphant modernity” in the XUAR as genocide, yet they do so by sharing stories about the deeply personal costs of colonization. This protest rhetoric also adds a new set of voices and contexts to our growing understanding of refugee-based representations. Bimbisar Irom (2018) has addressed such questions regarding Syrian refugee camps; Marta Montagut and Carlota M. Moragas-Fernández (2020) have done so for refugee discourse in Spain; Michael Dokyum Kim (2022) has tackled NGO messaging about refugees in the United Kingdom; and Melissa Wall (2021) has analyzed Syrian refugees practicing community building in Canada. Building on these prior studies, our analysis of refugee protest rhetoric points to an emerging international discourse, wherein refugees—bearing witness to atrocities even while displaced from their homes and communities—strive to illuminate what Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) calls “the humanitarian imaginary” (p. 45).

### **Refugees as Witnesses**

In terms of depictions of state violence and systemic oppression, one refugee, speaking from Turkey, said, “A re-education camp is a place where they humiliate the faith, identity, and dignity of Uighur Muslims . . . . These are places that the Chinese government uses to oppress us” (“These Are Places,” 2018, final para.). In this case, the critic depicts the systemic oppression caused by triumphant modernity by expressing feelings of humiliation, trampled identity, and lost dignity. Another refugee, speaking from Kazakhstan, describes how she was imprisoned without a trial and then harassed by prison guards who demeaned her local culture and beliefs while shouting, “The fact that you are living is thanks to the

Communist Party" (Rudolph, 2019a, Sayragul Sauytbay evidence section). Another exile, speaking from an undisclosed location, recounted how prison guards told her "You should see this as a treatment session for your infection" ("For the First Time," 2018, 05:25). As these testimonies indicate, the camps have produced a wave of revulsion in Xinjiang, where the locals feel their ways of life are besieged. As Kulzhbek said, speaking from Kazakhstan: "They started sending Imams to camps. Then they began sending those preaching Islam to camps. Then anyone who knew anything about the Koran. Finally, they began arresting people just for having a Koran at home, or even for praying" (Mauk, 2019, para. 11). Zharkynbek summarized: "They just want to erase us as a nation, erase our identity, and turn us into Chinese people" (Mauk, 2019, para. 32). As these refugee witnesses make clear, the PRC's campaign of "triumphant modernity" in Xinjiang is perceived on the ground as a systematic program of individual oppression and cultural erasure.

The extent of damage in the XUAR is so massive, however, and the ban on communication therein so suffocating, that these witnesses speak from exile, trying to convey a sense of the catastrophe while offering what are, at best, fragments of information, personal stories of pain. What we encounter here is the representational dilemma of trying to make the invisible visible, of trying to discuss genocide in ways that are both evidence-rich and emotionally compelling. As Irom (2018) notes, such refugee protest rhetoric strives to represent overwhelming "structures of injustice" while clinging to a sense of agency (p. 4,272).

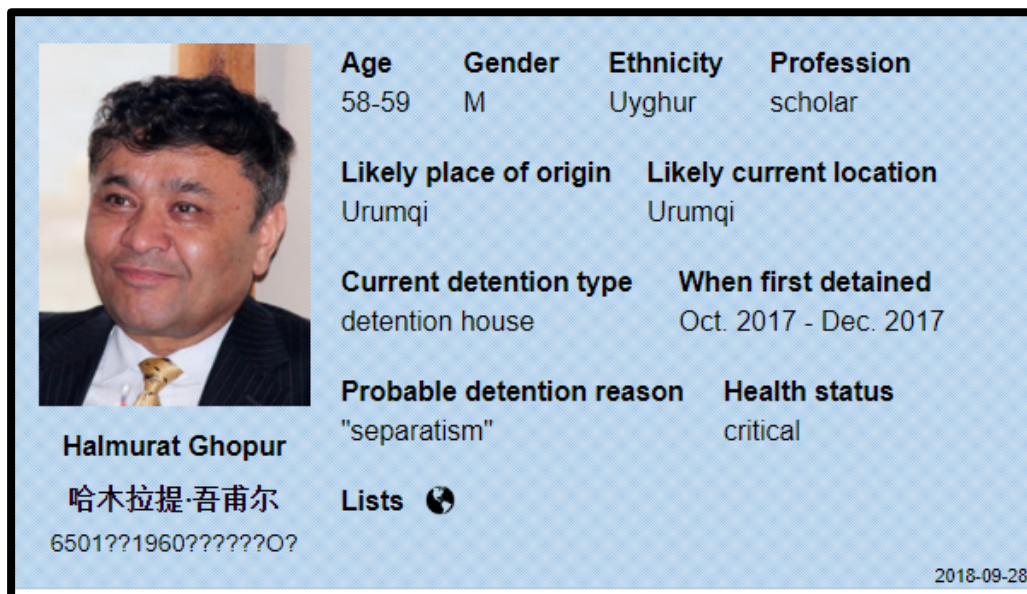
Within the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing, refugees strive to balance these competing objectives by focusing on personal, embodied moments. For example, as noted earlier, Xinjiang has served for centuries as the crossroads of empire—its borders have been porous, its political orders tenuous, and its populations dizzyingly diverse. Yet the Party's "Strike Hard" campaign has sought to seal Xinjiang's borders, rendering the once fluid space of migrations and cultural intermingling (Roberts, 2004) a zone of security, amounting to nationalism-as-exclusion (Cisneros, 2014; DeChaine, 2012). This process has hit Kazakhs hard, as their proximity to the XUAR, which used to facilitate long-standing patterns of economic and cultural exchange, has left them vulnerable to new rules limiting cross-border mobility. In Rahima's testimony, she describes being apprehended at the Kazakhstan/XUAR border. Having spent her life crossing the border without incident, Rahima is confused by her arrest. When she confronts a prison guard, he smirks: "You are guilty of using WhatsApp" (Mauk, 2019, Rahima's testimony, para. 7). This case illustrates how the Party's crackdown in the XUAR impacts the international flow of both bodies and communication technologies—including WhatsApp and the Zapy app favored by Uighurs and Kazakhs (Alecci, 2019)—leaving victims isolated and silenced. Rahima's testimony speaks to anyone who has ever crossed a border, or faced a threatening security check, or feared for the privacy of their communication device. Imagining Rahima at the border, her arrest unfolding, her phone being searched—that image of political injustice and personal humiliation serves as what Caitlin Bruce (2015) calls an "affect generator," a symbolic moment so poignant that it enables international audiences to identify with the narrator.

Many of the testimonies we found portray persecutions so illogical that it can be difficult for readers to find them credible; the fact that disappearances happen in an extrajudicial manner means victims often cannot identify perpetrators by name, let alone identify where they were held or tortured (see Niewenhuis, 2020a). Likewise, most of the witnesses fear for families and friends still in Xinjiang, whom they know will be arrested if they speak out, which means most testimonials are anonymous or pseudonymous—and this



raises questions about how scholars, journalists, and activists can corroborate the accounts. The Party has tried to take advantage of such complications, roaring that the NGOs, alternative media outlets, and pseudonymous critics supporting the witnesses are “anti-China tools manipulated by the U.S. government” while the eyewitnesses are “unverifiable and untraceable” (Jia & Weihua, 2020, para. 5).

To counter this questioning of the legitimacy of refugee accounts, the creators of the Xinjiang Victim Database (XVD) offer grueling details about thousands of detainees, each of whom is represented both visually and textually. For each victim, the XVD creates a mock identification card, providing readers with the thick details of a lived existence. We are thus confronted with the jarring task, in the case of Figure 1, of reconciling an extrajudicial arrest for “separatism” with the smiling face on the ID card. In fact, the XVD reports, “Halmurat Ghopur was the president of the Xinjiang Food and Drug Administration’s Department of Inspection and Supervision in Urumqi. He previously served as the President of Xinjiang Medical University Hospital” (Xinjiang Victim Database, Entry 253, n.d.). This successful scholar and civil servant, portrayed here before his disappearance, has been sentenced to death. As Holling (2014) notes, such visual evidence adds a sense of “presence” in spite of the victim’s “absence at the hands of (un)known assailants” (p. 322). The fact that the XVD offers more than 44,000 such profiles (as of September 2022) indicates how its creators are building what Anne Cubilié and Carl Good (2003) call “the documentary and evidentiary chain of witnessing” (p. 10). Indeed, if the CPC’s response to the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing is to cast doubt on the veracity of protesters’ claims, then the XVD database shows how activists are producing waves of personal information, creating a visual “chain” of evidence that creates a sense of “presence.” In short, each ID card works as an “affect generator” while the site as a whole demonstrates how the XVD is engaging in what Paolo Gerbaudo and Emiliano Treré (2015) call “collective identity building in social media activism” (p. 865).



**Figure 1. One of more than 44,000 cards created by the XVD.**  
 Note. Image used with the permission of the XVD (<https://shahit.biz/eng/#home>).

In contrast to Ghopur's smiling image, a trove of photographs released by Adrian Zenz (2022), what he calls "The Xinjiang Police Files," depict the camps as factories of misery (see also Alecci, 2022). The leaked evidence, supplied to Zenz by a hacker who accessed Chinese security networks, includes more than 5,000 "mug shots" taken of Uighurs on their arrest by the CPC and evidence of interrogation techniques, isolation strategies, reeducation in action, and security teams training for possible riots or escape attempts (see Figure 2). Whereas Figure 1 humanizes a victim by depicting his happy, pre-arrest self, Figure 2 depicts the military machinery of repression. Here is the infrastructure of the "Strike Hard" campaign, complete with prison SWAT teams, battle-level hardware, and a prisoner encased in a Guantánamo-style black hood. This image also works as an "affect generator," albeit in a different way, for whereas Figure 1 enables identification with a Uighur, Figure 2 prompts revulsion at the agents of his and his community's pain. The XVD archive enables viewers to exercise empathy with individuals, while the "Police Files" trigger anger at the architects of genocide. These images indicate just some of the visual strategies activists employ to bear witness to atrocity (for more examples, see Hingst, 2022; Romney, 2022).



**Figure 2. One of the thousands of photographs depicting brutality in the XUAR camps, in this case in a facility in Tekes county, Ili Prefecture, as leaked by Adrian Zenz (2022).**

*Note. The full archive is available at <https://www.xinjiangpolicefiles.org>. This image is courtesy of Zenz and the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (<https://victimsofcommunism.org>).*

The rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing works powerfully, then, when protesters and their allies share stories and images that represent both systematic forms of intimidation, surveillance, and abuse and the personal costs of such repression. Consider the responses to the Party's "United as One Family" campaign. Under this program, the CPC has sent as many as 1 million Han "relatives" to occupy the homes of local families, where the "relatives" serve as political watchdogs and conveyers of CPC propaganda (Byler, 2018; Grose, 2020). In this way, the "relatives" bring Chinese minders into Uighur homes, Mandarin into Turkic-speaking homes, and secular communism into Muslim homes, amounting to what Darren Byler (2018) describes as "a totalitarian process that seeks to dominate every aspect of daily life" (para. 63). As the witnesses Byler works with testify, the larger political purpose is genocide, yet the immediate, personally

embodied effect is humiliation: Something as fundamental as the love and safety one feels in their home is replaced by the daily grind of forced assimilation and constant surveillance.

The representational dilemma for protesters is how can you convey the breadth of the damage created by the “United as One Family” campaign? As we see below, the answer lies not in describing the program in its totality but in tackling the worst, most violating aspect of its procedure—and that means telling stories about state-sanctioned rape. Kazakh refugee Gulzira Auelkhan and Uighur refugees Tursunay Ziawudun and Sayragul Sauytbay have detailed systematic rape within the camps (Hill, Campanale, & Gunter, 2021). Shohret Hoshur (2019) reports that outside the prisons, under the “Pair Up and Become Family” program, Han “relatives” “regularly sleep in the same beds as the wives of men detained in the internment camps” (para. 1). Qelbinur Sidik has testified that she and her neighbors “would often hear that Uyghur women and young girls had been raped by Han cadres in their homes” (Erdem, 2020, para. 10). Considering the gravity of such allegations, it is stunning to learn the CPC has been offering 10,000 RMB to “Uyghurs and Han Chinese couples who get married,” meaning the “Pair Up” program is encouraging national assimilation via matrimony, incentivizing predatory behavior by Han “relatives” (“Xinjiang Authorities Push,” 2020, para. 1). Summarizing these testimonies, Dolkun Isa concludes such programs have “turned Uyghur homes into prisons” (Hoshur, 2019, para. 23). By sharing their visceral, embodied stories of rape, these witnesses to catastrophe convey the personal horrors of triumphant modernity.

Nonetheless, the genocide taking place in Xinjiang transcends any one witness’s ability to recount or explain, which means that we are left with the daunting task of assembling a tapestry of fragments, stories of trauma, and stunned testimonies rendered in hushed tones. Some of these reports come to us from refugees seeking safe haven outside the XUAR, while others come to us from Uighurs still on the ground, who have smuggled their stories past the censors. The rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing in the XUAR, then, similar to that of America’s abolitionists a century before, is created by “impossible witnesses,” by brave yet devastated souls offering evidence of injustice while hanging on for dear life (McBride, 2001). Still, if the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing can produce “affect generators” that break through to larger audiences, then the dissidents sharing their local stories can win international support (see Mislán & Shaban, 2019). Hence, in our conclusion, we survey responses to these cries for justice, showing how the concerns about genocide in the XUAR have begun to resonate in transnational spaces.

### **Conclusion: Working for Justice or Commuting to Chechnya?**

We have argued the Party’s imposition of triumphant modernity in Xinjiang amounts to genocide. To justify this process of cultural-destruction-in-the-name-of-national-construction (Zhao, 2004), the CPC has evoked the threats of religious extremism, separatism, and terrorism. In contrast, the Uighur and Kazakh witnesses cited herein, the chorus of international NGOs supporting them, and the brave reporting of international journalists sharing their stories—coalescing around a genre of communication we call “the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing”—depict China committing genocide in the XUAR. This protest rhetoric is most persuasive, we argue, when the totality of damage is revealed through personal, embodied stories that function as “affect generators” for international audiences.

Such communication only works when readers have a larger context for making sense of the personal testimonies. This means the embodied rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing relies for support on a wide range of different forms of reporting and scholarship. As seen above, both the European-based World Uighur Congress and the Washington, DC-based Uighur Human Rights Project have produced a wave of reports. Likewise, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights in China, and other NGOs have produced brave investigative and advocacy work, in many cases merging traditional forms of political reporting with the heartbreaking testimonies that drive the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing. A number of new and alternative news outlets have taken the lead in exploring this mixed strategy of protest, including *SupChina*, *Chinafile*, *China Digital Times*, and others. Finally, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *BBC*, *Radio Free Asia*, and other legacy news outlets have reported on the crisis, hence creating the informational context for making sense of the personal stories that drive the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing. Scholars too can participate in this process by amplifying the voices of allies and, as we have tried to do here, thinking through the rhetorical dynamics of bearing witness.

The Xi-era CPC seems impervious to international pressure, however. In fact, in September 2020, President Xi spoke about the nation's efforts in Xinjiang, describing them as "totally correct" and producing "great results" in the region's blossoming "happiness and security" (Xi, 2020, para. 4). In rebuttal, the U.S. Congress has passed two bills. Indicating the new bipartisan and anti-China consensus in Washington, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act (signed into law on June 17, 2020) levies Magnitsky sanctions against select Chinese officials for their actions, while the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (signed into law on December 23, 2021) prohibits U.S. corporations from doing business with Xinjiang-based entities linked to forced labor. Pursuing an international version of such actions, Uighur rights groups pressed the International Criminal Court (ICC; the "Hague") to open an investigation into the crisis, but because China is not a signatory to the Rome Statute, which founded the Court, the ICC ruled it had no jurisdiction (Hernández, 2020). At the 45th session of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, in October 2020, 39 member states read protests into the record ("As China Seeks Reelection," 2020). Perhaps most significantly, in August the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2022) released a report chronicling how "serious human rights violations have been committed" in Xinjiang, amounting to "crimes against humanity" (pp. 43, 44). As these examples demonstrate, the rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing—working in conjunction with the other forms of communication noted above—has not moved the Party to reverse its actions, yet it has succeeded in generating an international wave of concern for the plight of those suffering under triumphant modernity in the XUAR.

Given the CPC's rejection of international reporting, NGO-based activism, state-level legislation, and UN-level pressure, and considering its refusal to reflect on the pleas of the refugees quoted herein, it perhaps comes as no surprise to find experts warning the tensions in Xinjiang are on course for disaster. Noted critic Wang Lixiong (2014) concludes the "vicious cycle" of repression, violence, and then more repression is pushing the region toward an unresolvable crisis, what he calls "Palestinization" (see also Clarke, 2015). Sean R. Roberts (2018) likewise warns that by criminalizing virtually all aspects of Uighur culture and leaving no legal avenues of dissent, the PRC is "facilitating a self-fulfilling prophecy: the creation of a viable Uyghur militant insurgency like the one it has long claimed to face" (p. 253). The most ominous warning has come from within the CPC hierarchy, as *China Digital Times* has leaked a deleted Weibo post

by Zhao Chu, a military scholar, who wrote the XUAR is “on the express train to Chechnya” (Henochowicz, 2014, para. 1).

The tragedy is that the witnesses we have listened to do not seek violence, only justice; they do not pursue extremism, only religious freedom. The rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing depicts the personal costs of genocide, yet in its advocacy it calls not for war but for peace, it asks not for separatism but for multicultural pluralism, it amounts not to a rejection of modernity but to a plea for inclusive development rooted in equal opportunity. We hope this article serves as an invitation to readers to join these efforts for justice in the XUAR. As a first step, we encourage those readers seeking to support human rights in Xinjiang to consult the invitations to action available in the following organizations:

- Human Rights in China: <https://www.hrichina.org>
- Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org>
- Uyghur American Association: <https://www.uyghuraa.org>
- Uyghur Human Rights Project: <https://uhrp.org>
- World Uyghur Congress: <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en>

For those readers in the United States who hold out hope (as do we) for sensible legislative action, you can contact the key congressional leaders, as listed by the Congressional-Executive Committee on China: <https://www.cecc.gov/117th-congress>.

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