

# Muslim Identity in Contemporary China Through the Lens of Chinese Nationalism

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This article focuses on the concept of Chinese nationalism as a building and unifying tool of the nation. The Uyghurs are taken as a Muslim representative ethnic group in China as its forced Sinicization is the focus of global discussion, and the contention between the Uyghurs and the China state has become an international problem and a political headache for Beijing. This primarily Muslim group is one of the most numerous ethnic minorities in China, and has been affected by the assimilation policies adopted by the Chinese authorities with the purpose of strengthening the Chinese nation-state. The rise of national spirit in Chinese youth is unquestionable. Nation building has succeeded in almost all provinces. Only in a few of them does the state have to launch special educational and ideological programs, and sometimes resort to coercion to be successful. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the Chinese nation building project is not complete despite the great efforts of the authorities.

*Keywords:* Chinese nationalism, ethnic nationalism, Uyghurs, contemporary China, Sinicization

## Introduction

Modern global politics is shaped by numerous challenges, including the war in Ukraine, military conflicts, finance, the energy and migration crises, trade wars, global food system disruption, etc. All of these factors push governments to accelerate their nationalist rhetoric with the purpose of strengthening nation-state authority and legitimacy, protecting sovereignty, and gaining the people's loyalty. The Western scholars distinguish "good" and "bad" nationalisms, particularly with the case of Russian-Ukrainian War<sup>1</sup>. The national liberation (anti-colonial) struggles, self-determination movements are usually considered as acts of "terrorism" by the nation-state, which protects its sovereignty (Kuzio, 2020).

The end of globalization was the main theme of the 53rd World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2023. Nationalism has already become its alternative. Globalization is seen as a threat to the world economy and it needs a new formula<sup>2</sup>. Globalization is not going to the end, but it is struggling with the new challenges<sup>3</sup>. Some countries are still considering it as a great opportunity to promote their global influence. China is a good example of such a country, as it has "not only benefited from economic globalization, but also contributed to it"<sup>4</sup>. This

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<sup>1</sup> Taras Kuzio called Russian imperialism the bad nationalism when he wrote about the Russian-Ukrainian War.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Tooze: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/cocktail-globalization-according-to-an-expert-at-davos-2023/>.

<sup>3</sup> Al Jazeera: <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/1/20/is-globalisation-dead-at-davos-thats-the-big-question>.

<sup>4</sup> World Economic Forum: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/chinas-xi-jinping-defends-globalization-from-the-davos-stage/>.

year in Davos, Chinese Vice Premier Liu He defended globalization and stressed that foreign investment is still “welcome” and “the door to China will only open up further”<sup>5</sup>.

Nationalism has many definitions. It means the loyalty and devotion to a nation<sup>6</sup>, also the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity, and the actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve (or sustain) self-determination<sup>7</sup>. According to Patricia Sohn, nationalism is decidedly not racism, but sometimes it’s been associated with ethno-nationalism (Sohn, 2018). In 1882 Ernest Renan in his lecture “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” stated that “a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle”. According to Renan (1992), the glorious heritage and the triumphs along with the historical regrets are “the social capital upon which the national idea rests”.

The Chinese nation has a long history of development with moments of triumphs and humiliation. The simplest definition of Chinese nationalism (中国民族主义) can be found on Wikipedia as “a form of nationalism in the People’s Republic of China (Mainland China) and the Republic of China (Taiwan) which asserts that the Chinese people are a nation and promotes the cultural and national unity of all Chinese people”<sup>8</sup>.

Zheng Dahua stated that the modern Chinese nationalism developed around the period of the May 4th Movement<sup>9</sup>, its roots going back to the late 19th century and its rise was inspired by Western nationalism. As a consequence, there was the awakening of self-consciousness of the Chinese nation (Zheng, 2018). Other scholars, such as Peter Hays Gries and Minxin Pei determined that China’s nationalism was shaped by the pride of most Chinese in their history, the economic progress the country has made in the past 40 years, and that it was partly a creation of Western imperialism (Bajoria, 2008). The century of humiliation from the West and Japan has been in the center of nationalist rhetoric the last decades. Huang Xingtao stated the concept of “Chinese nation” equates to all ethnic groups within PRC’s territory (Huang, 2018). This concept was primarily announced by CCP after the September 18th and July 7th Marco Polo Bridge Incidents: “China is a multi-ethnic country and the Chinese nation is a joint name of all ethnic groups within Chinese Territory” (Zheng, 2019).

Dr. Sun Yat-sen in his Speech at the Shanghai Chinese Kuomintang Headquarters Meeting in 1920 stated the importance of integration of all ethnic groups in China into one Chinese nation and “then nationalism is over”<sup>10</sup>. According to Sun Yat-sen’s philosophy in the Three Principles of the People (nationalism, democracy, and the livelihood of the people), Chinese nationalism should be a form of civic nationalism constructed on top of a united value. The Chinese nation has become a natural and obvious category in just over a century<sup>11</sup>, that is the remarkable achievement of Chinese Nationalism (Lie, 2018). The concept of “the Chinese nation” has a significant impact on political thinking and actions in contemporary China. Xi Jinping mentions “the Chinese

<sup>5</sup> Wold Economic Forum: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/davos-2023-special-address-by-liu-he-vice-premier-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

<sup>6</sup> Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nationalism>.

<sup>7</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nationalism/>.

<sup>8</sup> Chinese nationalism (Wikipedia): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_nationalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_nationalism).

<sup>9</sup> The May 4th Movement is a Chinese anti-imperialist, political movement which grew out of student protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919.

<sup>10</sup> 修改党章的说明——在上海中国国民党本部会议的演说.

<http://www.sunyat-sen.org/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=46&id=6796>.

<sup>11</sup> John Li stated that in the context of the idea of East Asia, which societies had all stemmed from ancient China, and from the Sinocentrism (Zhonghua) perspective.

nation (中华民族)” very often in his public speeches<sup>12</sup>. This concept is widely disseminated by Chinese authorities and scholars (Zheng, 2019). However, North American scholars, among others, consider “the Chinese nation” as a unit of analysis, as an uncompleted project of the CCP.

As one of the key takeaways of the 20th Party Congress, Xi Jinping in his opening speech<sup>13</sup> stressed the importance of a strong “socialist” culture in China for promoting the “China story” to the rest of the world as well as deep patriotic education. Both will lead to the strengthening of Chinese nationalism. The global crisis and US-China confrontation has shaped a new wave of it. Now Li Shulei (李书磊), Xi’s protégé with Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Politics background<sup>14</sup>, spearheads China’s future global reputation as well as promotes Chinese nationalism domestically in a propaganda chief position (Yeh, 2022).

### **Ethnic Nationalism in China**

Beijing’s top priority is to maintain peace and stability at home while pursuing its national development plans and taking a leading role in the global arena. Nationalism serves as an effective tool for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to maintain control over the people and processes in China as well as to drive progress. From the outside, Chinese nationalism is certainly an impediment to China’s attempt to maintain the image of a responsible stakeholder and serves better as a tool in domestic policy more than in international relations. A big number of Western scholars look at the Chinese state—ethnic minorities relations as colonial, especially when it comes to Uyghurs or Tibetans (Bovingdon, 2010). However, according to John Lie, the integration of Chinese people into the nation-state, has a remarkable character due to the country’s achievements: a strengthened transportation and communication network, a single unified language<sup>15</sup>, a single currency, passport-free travel across the country, and the same time zone for all of China. Scholars do not doubt that contemporary China is a nation-state, and not a region, or a continent. Assimilation of ethnic minorities into Han culture<sup>16</sup>, as it is seen from outside of China, is the focus of international researchers as well as politicians and media.

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a multinational heterogeneous state, where Han is only an ethnic majority. All of the 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities have been successfully territorially integrated into the Chinese nation-state. It’s still a long way ahead to complete social and cultural integration. Ethnic relations in China are the combined result of complex historical interventions among various ethnic groups and the ethnic policy under the current Communist government (Hasmath & MacDonald, 2018). Ethnic nationalism or ethnonationalism—a form of nationalism related to national affirmation of a particular ethnic group with a common language, and a common ethnic ancestry—has been adopted in China and the CCP keeps it under control. The policy of ethnic equality is implemented through the Chinese ethnic policy<sup>17</sup>, the Beijing Minority Rights

<sup>12</sup> As an example, Xi Jinping speech at the 20th National Party Congress.

<sup>13</sup> 全国人民代表大会: <http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/kgfb/202210/5637af55a91d463290e5d77d2a7b8f90.shtml>.

<sup>14</sup> SCMP: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3197419/politburo-newcomer-and-xi-protége-confirmed-chinas-new-propaganda-chief-presenting-summary-20th>.

<sup>15</sup> Mandarin is unified language. However, some researchers discovered that un-Han with perfect Mandarin experienced discrimination on the job market. As an example, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0147596719301015?via%3Dihub>.

<sup>16</sup> I used terms assimilation and Sinicization as the policies that influence ethnic minorities identities by forcing them to assimilate the dominant Han Chinese culture.

<sup>17</sup> 中国的民族政策: [http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-07/14/content\\_335746.htm](http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-07/14/content_335746.htm).

Protection Policy<sup>18</sup>, which includes a quota system for minority's education, employment, housing, as well as taxation reduction, and "non-strict" family planning policy. All these special privileges are aimed to create benefits for ethnicities as well as gain loyalty from some members of ethnic minorities.

According to officials, Chinese nationalism is not the same as Han nationalism, and Han is only one of the 56 ethnic groups that live in China. The regional distribution of populations existed prior to the establishment of the PRC. The current hukou system (户口)<sup>19</sup> was launched during the 1950s, which registered citizens in China according to their local jurisdiction and regulated population mobility. The immigration of Han people to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) was rooted in a mix of individual and state-generated motivations, choices, and obligations, political and economic forces, and temporality and permanence (Joniak-Lüthi, 2013). The government argued that an influx of Han workers to this region was necessary for the boosting of economic development, to ensure stability, and to compensate for low numbers of skilled non-Han ethnic minorities. The Chinese government pays a great deal of attention to Xinjiang, also known as China's gateway to Eurasia, not only because of its geographical location neighboring Central Asia countries, but because of its economic importance. Over half of all Chinese exports to Central Asia go through Xinjiang (Golod, 2022a).

Ethnic relations are a very sensitive topic in China, especially when it concerns the Muslim minorities. During the Xi Jinping era, the Sinicization—the process of strengthening Han culture in China—was seriously condemned by international human rights organizations when it came to the Uyghur minority. As Max Oidtmann argues, Sinicization is an incorrect translation of the term “中国化”, which should be better rendered as Chinafication as it is not simply the assimilation of minority groups into the Han, but rather the creation of a new supra-ethnic identity animated by loyalty to the PRC state and the messianic world-historical mission of the CCP (Oidtmann, 2020). Xi Jinping has advocated for the Sinicization of Islam, and has called his policy toward Muslims “a totally correct success” during his speech in 2020 (Xinhua), as there have been no terrorist incidents in China since 2019<sup>20</sup> and the Terrorism index in China declined to 1.86/10 in 2021<sup>21</sup>.

The theory of Sinicization has become an intellectual trend discussed by Chinese and Western scholars and was adopted into three discourses. As Fangyi Chen summarized, the first discourse is about the assimilation of local people to Chinese language, culture, and economic life; the second argues that superiority in Chinese culture has produced cultural change across eastern Eurasia to promote nationalism; the third discourse emphasizes the diversity of people living in contemporary China to construct and stabilize the polity (Chen, 2021). The Chinese Islamic Association serves as an instrument of Sinicisation for the Chinese government and of soft power to build relations in Central Asia and across the Muslim world (Golod, 2022b).

The Chinese Muslims are concentrated in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (Ningxia), Qinghai Province, Gansu Province, Yunnan Province, Tianjin Municipality, Beijing Municipality, Henan Province, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and others. Uyghurs, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Tatar, and Uzbek ethnicities live mostly in XUAR.

<sup>18</sup> 北京市少数民族权益保障条例: [http://www.beijing.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengcefagui/201905/t20190522\\_56443.html](http://www.beijing.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengcefagui/201905/t20190522_56443.html).

<sup>19</sup> Hukou system (户口) is a system of household registration used in mainland China.

<sup>20</sup> GTD dataset University of Maryland: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.

<sup>21</sup> Trading economics: <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/terrorism-index>.

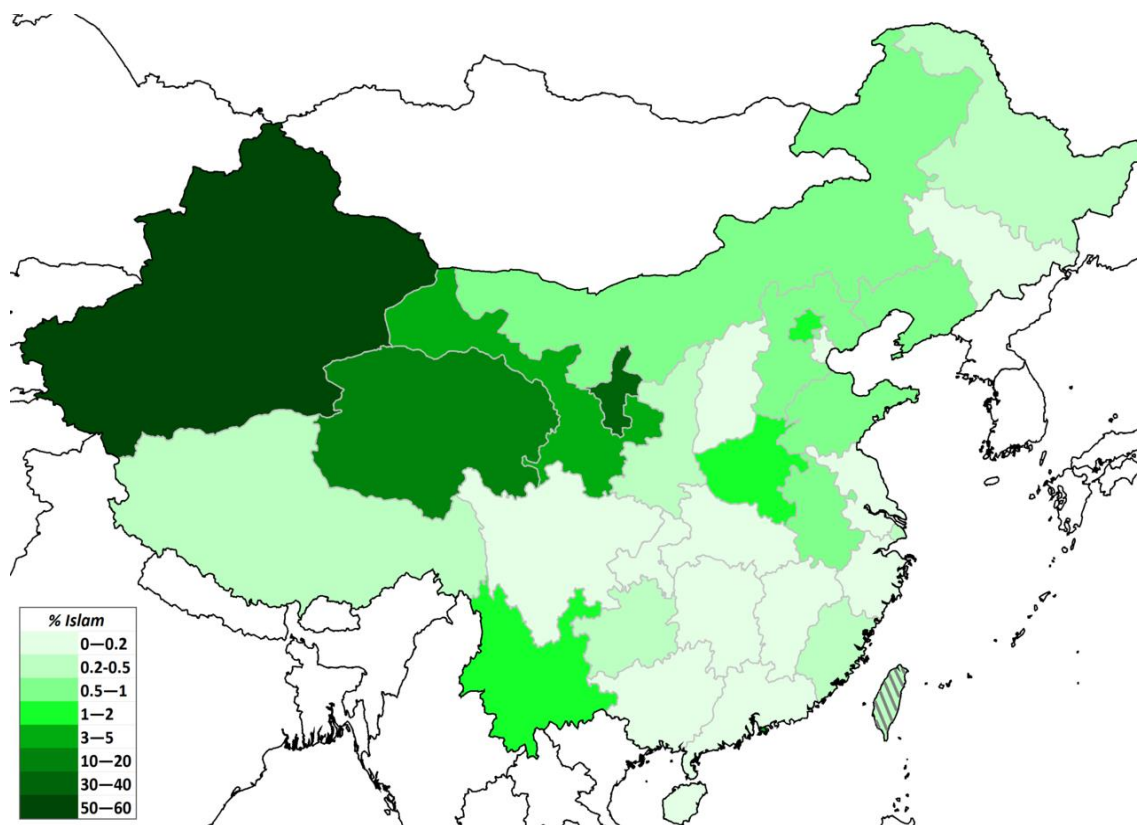


Figure 1. Muslims localities in China.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Islam\\_in\\_China\\_with\\_0.2\\_\(Yang\\_Zongde\\_2010\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Islam_in_China_with_0.2_(Yang_Zongde_2010).png).

Today, there are about 28 million Muslims living in China, accounting for 1.73% of the total population, including Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Dongxiang, Kyrgyz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bonan, and Tatar ethnicities. Although many Western media claims that Chinese policy in XUAR toward Uyghurs is genocide<sup>22</sup>, the total Muslim population is rising. Ethnic minorities have experienced higher growth rates than the majority Han population. During 2010–2020 period, Uyghurs showed a growth of 16.93%, Hui—7.48%, Kazakh—6.83%<sup>23</sup>. Sean R. Roberts and Gardner Bovingdon have described Chinese party-state politics toward Uyghurs as cultural genocide, which aims to destroy their identity (Bovingdon, 2010).

Every ethnicity has its own history and challenges regarding integration into Chinese society. According to Raphael Israeli, all the efforts of Beijing of “crash integration” or “lax liberalization” have historically brought the rise of Muslim separatism in China (Israeli, 2002). Sean R. Roberts explained the numerous rebellions, protests, and acts of terrorism in Kashgar, Urumqi, Yining, and Beijing as anti-colonial national liberation struggles and rebellion against forced assimilation. The “Global War on Terror” (GWOT) has allowed the use of the label “terrorist” to justify blatant suspension of human rights for the entire population (Roberts, 2020). In

<sup>22</sup> The Economist “‘Genocide’ is the wrong word for the horrors of Xinjiang”; BBC “Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide?”; Voice of America “Uyghur Genocide in China: What We Know About the Republic’s Concentration Camps”.

<sup>23</sup> Statista. Muslim population in China 2010 and 2020, by ethnicity: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/619931/china-number-of-muslims-by-ethnicity/>, quoting the official PRC statistics from the 2020 census published here: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/7rp/zk/indexch.htm>.

Chinese case, the “terrorist threat” from Uyghurs has been established internationally since 2002, when Eastern Turkistan Independent Movement (ETIM) got into the “terrorist list” created by United Nations Security Council, but ETIM was removed from the list as “no credible evidence” was found that it still exists<sup>24</sup>. The Chinese authorities strengthened all types of control in Xinjiang and other areas in the name of anti-terrorism. The fate of the Uyghurs has depended on global political processes and still does now.

In *The Dream of East Asia*, John Lie argued that Chinese peripheries, from Uyghurs and Mongolians to Koreans and Tibetans, all do not conform to the new nationalist Han norm. The Chinese authority may face a domino effect: if one territory gains greater cultural autonomy or political independence, then others may demand the same. China wouldn’t like to become a rump state, and blocks all possible secessionist movements. The ethnic heterogeneity, combined with the large territory, poses a potentially destabilizing threat for the CCP and China’s territorial integrity.

### Uyghurs’ Identity

Uyghurs are Sunni Muslims, speak Uyghur (which belongs to the Turkic language family), and have been practicing Islam for centuries. The Uyghur community’s ethnic identity in XUAR is a particular example of ethno-nationalism, a form of political consciousness along the lines of nationality. By tracing the process of its identity formation and transformation, scholars explore the dynamic between CCP policy toward Uyghurs and their social assimilation, sometimes calling it cultural genocide (Roberts, 2020). Uyghur nationalism has been shaped by a millennium of conflict, self-determination, outside influence, war, and peace. Beijing claims Uyghurs as a part of the “great family of the Chinese nation” and Xinjiang as “an integral piece of Chinese national territory since ancient times” (Bovingdon, 2010). The religious factor has played a significant role in the formation of ethno-nationalism of Uyghurs and in their desire to take social actions. Their religion, influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism, and even Christianity has produced a unique Sufi Islam. Sinicization by Xi Jinping introduced strict rules and control into the region with the purpose of preventing Islamic fundamentalism from taking root in modern Xinjiang. As many scholars advocate, Uyghur resistance to Chinese rule is prompted by nationalism, not Islamism (Bovingdon, 2010).

Uyghur identity is comprised of its history, religion, and traditions. Culturally and linguistically they are closer to the people of Central Asia, than to the Han ethnic group. However, they are identified with settled traditions as opposed to the nomadic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen. Uyghurs have a diverse genetic history, so their physical appearance might be associated with different people throughout Eurasia, but also Han people. As Sean R. Roberts, the current relationship between Han and Uyghurs has racial dimension, and Uyghurs were marked as “others” in a modern society that associates homogeneity with stability (Roberts, 2020).

Economic factors are also important in Uyghur modern life. Historically Uyghurs have been farmers, specifically involved in cotton growing. “The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act”<sup>25</sup>, that went into effect on June 21, 2022, badly affected the industry and the whole region (MOFA). The acceleration of economic development in XUAR put Uyghurs in inequitable competitive conditions with higher-skilled Han Chinese, who immigrated into Xinjiang, but created a demand on the labor force in different industries. The rising leadership of China in Central Asia will bring additional benefits to Xinjiang and reinforce the geostrategic significance of

<sup>24</sup> DW: <https://www.dw.com/en/us-removes-separatist-group-condemned-by-china-from-terror-list/a-55527586>.

<sup>25</sup> The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act: <https://www.dhs.gov/uflpa>.

the region (Golod, 2022a). Xinjiang's economy is developing more rapidly than the economies of the neighboring countries (with the exception of Kazakhstan). The current CCP strategy toward Uyghurs focuses on increasing wealth and a rising standard of living for the middle class in Xinjiang, gaining their loyalty, but at the same time transforming the local landscape and influencing Uyghurs' identity. The young Uyghur middle class have better job opportunities than older generations, and get a better education. However, they will be less ingrained in Uyghur culture than their parents. Born in the 2000s, they will be the first generation of Uyghurs who will be completely literate in the Chinese language (Roberts, 2020).

Forced assimilation of Uyghurs from the 1900s to the 2000s evolved from soft integration through economic opportunities to state-sponsored programs specially created for this purpose. The programs included monolingual education in Mandarin Chinese in the XUAR; placing Uyghur children in boarding schools in inner China as well as Uyghur workers sent to other provinces to work and live with Han; inter-ethnic marriage, sometimes even forced; launching of the economic project "Open up the West" with the additional aim of "removing signs of Uyghur culture from the landscape" (Roberts, 2020).

The young generation might continue to feel very strongly about their Uyghur identity, but with the increasing immigration of Han Chinese and the development of the regional economy, Uyghur culture might eventually dissolve against the interests of the dominant Han culture. The status quo should be found under the pressure of international society and the unity of the nation.

### Conclusion

The political stability of the PRC rests on Chinese nationalism and economic growth. CCP ideology under Xi Jinping is a practical one, serving its population well and showing a perfect outcome of economic reforms. The internal separatism and external threats will strengthen the state's desire to maintain its territorial integrity and to encourage the national spirit in the name of the Chinese Dream. The role of the world factory has generated numerous problems for Chinese society and ecology. The consequences of Covid-19 are significant for the national economy in general as well as for international businesses that needed to relocate out of China. To continue its rise and maintain political order, the CCP focuses on national development projects, patriotic rhetoric, and common values<sup>26</sup> to consolidate its population. Under the current circumstances, China is not able to extend its power beyond its territory, unlikely to claim global leadership for now. As proof, its actionless position toward the war in Ukraine doesn't correspond to this role.

China adopted ethnonationalism for 55 ethnic minority groups, but keeps it under strict control as it sees the destabilizing threat in ethnic heterogeneity. According to the officials, assimilation of ethnic minorities into Han culture is a necessary measure to unite the country even despite the resistance.

Sinicization of Uyghurs is a sensitive topic for Chinese authorities as well as for Western politicians, which has attracted global media headlines. The CCP demands that the world not interfere in China's internal affairs. At the same time, human rights advocates proved to Western authorities the necessity to impose sanctions to protect Uyghur identity. As propaganda is clearly evident from both sides, the Uyghur issue became the political manipulation tool.

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<sup>26</sup> The Core Socialist Values were declared at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012. The 12 values, written in 24 Chinese characters: 富强, 民主, 文明, 和谐, 自由, 平等, 公正, 法治, 爱国, 敬业, 诚信, 友善.

Sinicization through language, migration, education, inter-marriage, and economic development has affected the identities of all ethnic minorities without exception. Chinese nation building is not over yet, some scholars call it incompletable, even though the CCP regularly announces its success domestically and internationally. The researchers in monographs argue on the causes and consequences of the assimilation. Most of them have come to the same conclusion: the Chinese authorities should guarantee the preservation of the Uyghur identity in the unitary heterogenic state.

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