Disaggregating Xi Jinping’s China

By Emile Dirks and Diana Fu

Synopsis

Today, President Xi Jinping is the most powerful Chinese leader in a generation. As Canada navigates one of the thorniest periods in its relationship with China, it is imperative to analyze how Xi’s policies have impacted China’s diverse population. Under Xi’s rule, the party-state has pushed forward with anti-poverty campaigns and social reforms, providing greater financial and social security to some of China’s poorest. However, for many of China’s ethnic and religious minorities Xi’s tenure has been marked by growing repression. These developments make it tempting to view Xi’s rule as a break from the past. However, his administration has continued the many of the policies of his predecessor while deepening the reach of the central party-state. This report disaggregates Chinese society by examining the impact of Xi’s rule on China’s rural poor, migrant workers, and ethnic minorities.

About the Author

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The People’s Republic of China is the world’s largest and most powerful authoritarian state. Increasingly, the party-state is synonymous with one person: Xi Jinping. Since coming to power in 2012, Xi has sought to consolidate one-man rule. In early 2018, China’s National People’s Congress made two major revisions to the country’s constitution. The first was removing presidential term limits. The second was elevating “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” to a position as one of China’s official guiding ideologies. Both revisions strengthened his hand. With term limits lifted, Xi may now rule beyond the end of his second term in 2023. And with the addition of “Xi Jinping Thought” to the preamble of the constitution, Xi is now synonymous with China’s one-party state. The Communist Party’s twenty-five-member politburo designation of him as “the people’s leader” in December 2019 further cemented Xi as the most powerful Chinese leader in a generation.2

As Canada navigates one of the thorniest periods in its relationship with China, it is imperative to analyze how Xi consolidated power and how his policies have impacted a diverse population. Under his rule, the party-state has pushed forward with anti-poverty campaigns and social reforms left unfinished by his predecessor, President Hu Jintao. These moves have brought greater financial and social security for some of China’s poorest. However, for many of China’s ethnic and religious minorities Xi’s tenure as China’s core leader has been marked by growing surveillance and repression. These changes have been so dramatic that it is tempting to view his rule as a sharp break from the past. Yet in many ways, Xi has continued the earlier policies while deepening the reach of the central party-state. This report disaggregates Chinese society by focusing on the impact of the Xi administration on three populations: the rural poor, migrant workers, and ethnic minorities.

Uplifting the Poor

“No region or ethnic group can be left behind”

– Xi Jinping on poverty alleviation, 20163

When the Chinese government speaks of human rights, it often frames the topic in terms of economic and social development.4 According to the government’s 2019 white paper on human rights, “China regards the rights to subsistence and development as the primary and basic human rights.”5 And in turn, protecting these social rights has been tied to national economic development. Between 1978 and 2008, China’s economy grew at an average rate of roughly 9.8% per year.6 The fruits of this growth contributed to declining poverty rates. During that same period, the party-state boasted of lifting 800 million Chinese citizens out of poverty.7

High-speed growth, however, was only part of the reason for poverty reduction. Under Hu Jintao, targeted poverty alleviation programs and the redistribution of wealth downwards also played key roles.8 In 2011, the same year that China surpassed Japan to become the world’s second-largest economy, Beijing raised the poverty line by eighty per cent, bringing it in line with the World Banks’ then-poverty line of $1.25 a day and giving 128 million more citizens access to anti-poverty assistance.9 One consistent focus of state-led poverty-reduction efforts has been China’s rural areas, which have lagged behind in reaping the benefits of the nation’s wealth. Anti-poverty measures introduced by Xi’s predecessor, including rural pension systems and medical cooperatives,10 led to early successes. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in 2015, 5.7% of China’s countryside was classified as being in extreme poverty, a significant decrease from 73.5% in 1990.11

Building on the gains made under his predecessors, Xi vowed the party-state would eliminate rural poverty by the end of 2020.12 As with past efforts, Xi’s administration relied on state investment and targeted social programs. In 2014, the Chinese government identified 832 counties as impoverished.13 Since 2015, his administration has spent roughly US$700 billion (C$880 billion) in grants and loans to boost transportation linkages between cities and remote rural communities, construct new homes for rural residents, and improve reliable access to electricity and clean drinking water.14 Xi’s poverty-alleviation...
campaign has also adopted new methods, rewarding personal initiatives of the poor and putting money directly into the pockets of the most stricken communities. State assistance would not only be targeted to these communities but also directed at specific households and individuals. According to a recent Economist report, central government funding for each “extremely poor person” increased from 500 yuan (US$77) in 2015 to 2600 yuan (US$400) in 2020.

The Chinese party-state has trumpeted Xi’s successes in poverty eradication. By the end of 2020, all 832 rural counties classified as impoverished had been lifted out of extreme poverty. The poverty-eradication campaign also doubled as a propaganda tour for Xi, who regularly appeared on television chatting to peasants and inspecting crops. Local officials, never hesitant to congratulate themselves, decorated newly constructed homes with slogans praising the Party and photographs of Xi. For Beijing, poverty reduction has also served another goal: strengthening central government power over local authorities. Throughout the campaign, the State Council’s Poverty Alleviation Office has conducted annual inspections to ensure that cadres are not pocketing poverty-alleviation funds. Such anti-graft measures dovetail with the broader anti-corruption campaign launched in 2012, just before the beginning of the campaign against rural poverty.

Having claimed victory over rural poverty, in October 2020 the Fifth Plenum of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a communiqué laying out ambitious plans for the next fifteen years. Among them was achieving “modern socialism” and doubling per capita GDP to US$10,000 (C$12,780) by 2035. Key to achieving this is to increase the size of China’s middle class. According to China’s National Bureau of Statistics, roughly 400 million Chinese citizens are classified as middle income. While impressive, this figure represents only a third of China’s total population.

Moving Migrants into the Consumer Class

Growing the middle class could not rest solely on continuing economic growth; like poverty reduction, it would require broader policy interventions. Chief among them are changes to industrial policy. By the late 2000s, the Hu Jintao administration realized low-cost manufacturing could not remain the engine of national economic growth. If China wished to strengthen its position within global markets, it would need to move up the international value chain. As the world struggled to recover from the fallout of the 2007–2009 global recession, the Chinese government began to roll out support for domestic companies seeking to move into higher-value sectors like computing and automobiles or to acquire foreign companies already competitive in these fields.

Since Xi’s coming to power in 2012, the Chinese party-state has continued to provide extensive capital and research and development assistance for private and state-owned firms. However, building up China’s middle class would need more than changes in industrial policy. It would also require removing structural barriers that have kept millions locked out of the middle class: namely, institutions that have barred China’s 260 million migrant workers from enjoying the right to permanent urban residency. Working long hours for limited pay, these women and men were the backbone of China’s manufacturing sector for decades. Many came from the same villages targeted for poverty alleviation under Hu and Xi. And leaving their homes in China’s vast countryside, they had moved to the factories of China’s coast to find work to better themselves and their families.

Despite their work in the urban core of China’s economy, they found themselves locked out of China’s middle class by the country’s household registration (hukou) system. Introduced in the 1950s to control internal migration, the hukou system categorized all Chinese citizens according to their place of birth and their status as a rural or urban resident. During the post-Mao period of capitalist market reforms (1978–present), China’s coastal cities became hubs of export-led manufacturing. To satisfy demand for labour, rural residents were permitted to move to urban manufacturing areas to find work. However, the hukou system severely impeded their access to urban social services. Despite living and working for years in sprawling metropolises like Shenzhen, migrant workers were not eligible to purchase housing, nor were their children permitted to attend local schools. These controls created a permanent subaltern class of individuals locked out of many of the benefits of urban life and prevented from becoming members of the urban middle class.
Reforming the hukou system had been on the policy docket long before Xi came to power, as the costs of inaction were obvious. The social and financial precarity of urban migrant workers was potentially suppressing domestic demand and could act as a long-term drag on China’s economy. If China was to transition from low-end export-led manufacturing towards a high-value domestic consumer economy, China’s migrant working class would need a path to permanent urban residence and the middle class.

Calls to replace the hukou system with a national residence system were made in the last days of the Hu Jintao administration. Xi Jinping’s own personal views on the matter tilted the balance in favour of hukou reform. According to state media, Xi’s 2001 doctoral dissertation had called for reforming and eventually abolishing the hukou system. After taking the helm of the party-state, Xi continued to push forward with reforms that had been kick-started in latter period of the Hu administration. A reform plan calling for the creation of a new hukou system by 2020 was tabled in December 2013 by a dozen ministries and commissions. This was followed in July 2014 with the announcement of a points-based system whereby qualified migrants would be permitted to settle down as permanent urban residents. And in December 2020, China’s State Council announced relaxing or cancelling the hukou system in cities up to 5 million people.

Many migrant workers have eagerly seized the opportunity to take up urban residency. Nonetheless, it remains unclear just how many have actually been granted the coveted urban residency status. The Chinese government claims that 100 million new urban residence permits were issued between 2016 and 2019, a figure neatly in line with the Chinese government’s goal of adding 100 million rural residents to China’s cities by 2020. Other estimates suggest only half this number were handed out between 2014 and 2019. These discrepancies reveal the persistent limits on internal migration, despite reform. In first-tier cities, a points-based system allows only certain individuals to settle down. Under a system introduced in Beijing in 2018, only individuals under retirement age and without criminal records are permitted to apply for local residency permits. In Shanghai, the children of lower-scoring applicants are prevented from attending top schools in the city centre and instead are diverted to schools on the city’s outskirts.

This stratified system has also been accompanied by more repressive measures. In order to remove unwanted migrant communities from the capital, a coercive relocation campaign was launched in late 2017. Following a fire that killed nineteen in a migrant community in Beijing, police began a program of mass evictions that left tens of thousands homeless. Authorities justified the destruction of the migrant worker shantytowns in the name of public health and sanitation. But many saw it as a reminder of the persistent social and legal discrimination China’s migrant workers continued to face, hukou reform notwithstanding.

Despite these setbacks, the potential social and economic benefits could be immense should hukou reform continue under Xi. Granting legal residency to rural migrants gives them and their families access to education, healthcare, and other social services, thus improving the livelihoods of this historically marginalized group. And coupled with the right to purchase property, hukou reform could in the long term play a limited role in alleviating pent-up consumer demand as Xi Jinping encourages increased domestic consumption in the face of growing economic tensions with the United States. However, the hukou reform may not significantly boost consumer spending, given migrant workers’ persistently low incomes of roughly 3,900 yuan (C$773) per month in 2019. This is less than half of urban residents’ incomes, which average at around 8,400 yuan (C$1,665) in thirty-seven major cities.

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Quelling the Frontiers

“Those who engage in separatist activities in any part of China will be smashed into pieces”

– Xi Jinping, 2019

Xi has not only pushed forward with long-desired poverty-reduction campaigns and social reforms. Since coming to power, Xi has also tightened social controls on another diverse group of Chinese citizens: ethnic and religious minorities.

Officially, China is home to fifty-five ethnic minorities, in addition to the majority Han, accounting for roughly eight per cent of China’s total population. The Communist Party has long seen managing inter-ethnic relations as a key pillar of regime legitimacy. This has meant publicly renouncing “Han chauvinism” in favour of limited ethnic self-determination within a unified nation-state. Under China’s constitution, ethnic autonomous areas in which ethnic-minority peoples are concentrated have the right to manage their affairs and develop their culture. These areas include the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the Tibet Autonomous Region, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Members of ethnic-minority communities were also exempted from China’s former “one child” family-planning policy and remain beneficiaries of affirmative action programs in China’s university admission exam system.

In practice, genuine autonomy for China’s non-Han peoples has been limited. Han officials often assume key leadership positions in autonomous areas, provoking critique that minority representation is practiced in name only. Han migration to ethnic-minority areas has been encouraged for decades, leading to the Han population of Xinjiang growing from six per cent in 1949 to roughly forty per cent at the beginning of Xi’s first term in office. For some Han officials, however, the problem is that the Party has too little control over ethnic-minority regions that often lie on the territorial frontiers of China. Such views gained ground in the late 2000s in the wake of uprisings in two autonomous territories that have long been considered sources of internal instability by the party-state: Tibet and Xinjiang. In March 2008, popular discontent over Chinese rule in Tibet led to weeks of protests. The following year in July 2009, inter-ethnic riots between Uyghurs and Han broke out in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang. In both cases, the Hu Jintao administration reacted swiftly using state repression. In Tibet, security forces killed dozens and arrested hundreds. In Xinjiang, the end of the conflict led to an internet blackout in Urumqi that lasted into mid-2010.

Yet, to some Chinese scholars and officials, this unrest was a warning: China’s ethnic policies had failed to eliminate the threat of “ethnic separatism.” What was needed was a new assimilationist approach, one that would encourage the “sinicization” of ethnic-minority peoples. Looming in the background was the memory of the breakup of the Soviet Union, which some Party leaders blamed on insufficient dedication to socialism and ethnic disunity. Such views have found a powerful backer in Xi Jinping. For Xi, the Soviet Union’s collapse was a clear learning experience: material development was not enough to hold the country together – it also needed ethnic unification. Without widespread faith in China’s socialist system and a unifying national identity, ethnic disunity could rend China to pieces.

To this end, the Xi administration has repeatedly conflated ethnic and religious policy with national security and party-state control. In a 2019 speech delivered at the National Ethnic Unity Advancement Commendation Conference, Xi spoke of tackling separatist sentiments and hinted at a possible reduction in the preferential policies aimed at ethnic minorities, while in a speech at the Communist Party’s 2015 National Conference on Religious Work, he called on religious groups to “sinicize” and further submit themselves to management by China’s party-state.

Evidence of deepening controls on other ethnic-minority peoples can be found in China’s frontier...
regions. In Inner Mongolia in September 2020, locals protested moves by educational authorities to change the language of instruction for public school courses in history, politics, and literature courses from Mongolian to Mandarin Chinese by 2022.54 Similar moves had already been implemented in Xinjiang in 2017 and Tibet in 2018, part of what some scholars have referred to as “second generation ethnic policies.”55 This “melting pot” approach to ethnic affairs goes beyond language policy. In Tibet, Xi Jinping has called for the “sinicization” of Tibetan Buddhism,56 while a mass labour-transfer program begun in 2016 targeting rural Tibetans has tied poverty alleviation to the party-state’s fight against what it sees as separatist sympathies among the Tibetan people.57

The high costs of these assimilationist policies are also evident in Xinjiang, where an ongoing campaign of surveillance and mass detention has for years targeted the region’s Uyghur, Kazakh, and other Muslim populations. Following a series of attacks committed by Uyghur individuals outside Xinjiang – first a vehicular attack near Tiananmen Square in 201358 and later a knife attack on a train station in the southern province of Yunnan in 201459 – Xi called on the party-state to wage a merciless “struggle against terrorism, infiltration and separatism” in the region.60 With the 2016 appointment of Chen Quanguo as Party Secretary of Xinjiang (former Party Secretary of Tibet58), existing controls on this predominantly Muslim region were severely tightened. Police ranks swelled. Between 2009 and 2016, the number of advertised security-related positions in Xinjiang averaged 5,000 per year; between 2016 and 2017, the number of advertised positions grew to more than 90,000.62 Local “convenience police stations” mushroomed across the region, as did surveillance cameras and other forms of biometric data collection.63

Most disturbing has been the growth of Xinjiang’s carceral system. Since 2017, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and Muslim minority peoples have been detained without trial in re-education camps across Xinjiang.64 Experts estimate that the number of detention facilities may be nearly four hundred.65 Chinese authorities defend these camps as providing vocational training for people they claim are at risk of religious radicalization. Yet the reasons for detention are more mundane, including violating family-planning regulations, wearing a headscarf, communicating with relatives overseas, and even praying.66 Religious and ethnic identity – not extremist activities or sympathies – are the primary target of state repression. Reports of abuse from those detained in these camps are numerous and credible.67

Those released are kept under close supervision by state workers tasked with visiting the homes of Uyghur and other Muslim families.68 Police use mobile apps like the Integrated Joint Operations Platform to collect, analyze, and share information on Muslims.69 Surveillance cameras, many equipped with facial recognition capabilities, are used to monitor public places. Mosques, graveyards and other culturally significant places have been demolished or placed under close police supervision.70 There is also extensive evidence of Uyghurs and others forced to work at factories across China and in Xinjiang’s profitable cotton industry.

While some of these programs are unique to Xinjiang, the Chinese state has long used similar methods against groups viewed as threats to social stability. These so-called “key populations” (zhongdian renkou) targeted by the state include Falun Gong practitioners, users of drugs, and petitioners, among others. As early as the mid-2000s, the Ministry of Public Security had begun building a national system of integrated databases allowing local police across China to collect, store, and share information on these groups.71 By connecting personal files to national ID card numbers, police can track key people online and offline. Similar apps have been used in Xinjiang to track Uyghurs72 while the region’s detention centres are modeled on pre-existing forms of extrajudicial detention aimed at users of drugs and other key populations.73

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New control technologies may play a role in the expansion of state surveillance, but the key driver is politics. More than his predecessors, Xi Jinping has emphasized that national security must inform “all aspects of the work of the party and the country.” And in order to pre-empt the emergence of potential threats, China’s domestic security forces are subjecting ever more Chinese citizens outside Xinjiang to police surveillance or compulsory data collection. Chinese police now regularly collect biometric data – including vocal and iris scans – from citizens outside any criminal investigation. An ongoing police campaign begun in late 2017 aims to collect DNA samples from tens of millions of men and boys across China. What has changed under Xi are not the tools of state repression but how broadly these tools are applied.

How Canada Should Navigate a Diverse China

Dealing with China requires a nuanced understanding of not only its foreign affairs but also of its domestic politics. In navigating this period of heightened Sino-Canadian tensions, it is worth considering what effect Xi’s rule has had on China’s diverse population. It is also important to understand the diversity of Chinese society in order to better engage in people-to-people exchanges.

First, Ottawa should take action to protect the rights and interests of Chinese citizens wishing to travel, study, or seek asylum in Canada. Recently, a Hong Kong-focused immigration initiative announced by the Trudeau administration in November 2020 has been criticized for aiming to attract highly skilled immigrants from Hong Kong rather than being a genuine offer of shelter to those fleeing repression. While it is heartening that no asylum claims will be rejected on the basis of conviction under China’s National Security Law, Ottawa must ensure that Chinese citizens facing persecution in mainland China and Hong Kong find safety in Canada, regardless of their age, level of education, or employment history.

Second, Ottawa should join other countries in speaking out publicly against human rights abuses in all areas of the world, including in China. The Chinese government’s anti-Muslim policies have been condemned across Canada’s political spectrum, though extensive disagreements exist over what Canada can or should do. Earlier in January, the Canadian government announced it would prohibit the importation of goods manufactured by forced labour in China. A 226-0 vote in the House of Commons on February 22 denounced state repression in Xinjiang as genocide, though notably Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and nearly all of his cabinet abstained from the vote. While there is debate in Ottawa and abroad about the use of the term genocide, Canada should continue to join with other countries in denouncing any actions on the part of the Chinese government which violate the rights of China’s ethnic and religious minorities.

Third, Ottawa should continue to carefully distinguish criticisms of Chinese state behaviour from unfounded attacks on Chinese people. The Canadian government should continue to voice full-throated denunciation of Sinophobia. A recent survey conducted by the Angus Reid Institute shows that racism against Chinese people in Canada has increased markedly since the Covid-19 pandemic began, while a report by the Chinese Canadian National Council found that during the same period more instances of anti-Asian racism were reported per capita in Canada than in the United States. To his credit, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has condemned such attacks. Yet, baseless claims that Chinese communities in Canada represent a “fifth column” threatening to subvert Canadian institutions continue to surface in public and official discourse. Federal authorities should avoid following in the footsteps of the US Department of Justice’s “China Initiative” which scholars have warned “creates an over-inclusive conception of the threat” to national security posed by individuals and entities with even a limited connection to China’s party-state. Such a campaign, if replicated in Canada, could easily spiral into a “red scare.”

Finally, Canadian universities also have an important role to play during this time of fraught Sino-Canadian relations. To maintain people-to-people ties, government support should be given to promote study exchanges between Canada and China. At the same time, university administrators should ensure that academic freedom is guaranteed and that a range
of voices find space to express themselves on Canadian campuses. This includes inviting speakers or holding events deemed politically sensitive by Chinese diplomats here in Canada. Faculty should continue to pursue research partnerships with their Chinese peers while simultaneously promoting critical scholarship on Chinese politics and society. And where possible, academic departments should sponsor Chinese academics, writers, and activists vulnerable to state persecution to come to Canada as long-term visiting scholars. As the space for free expression shrinks in the mainland and Hong Kong, leveraging the relative freedom of Canadian institutions of higher education would be an important endorsement of diversity of perspectives on China.

On the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations with China, Ottawa should reflect on its relationship with Beijing and identify which populations within China it needs to speak with or support. In 1970, Pierre Trudeau faced a Chinese state wracked by internal unrest, locked out of the United Nations, and looking to the outside world for recognition. In 2021, Justin Trudeau faces a Chinese state confident at home, powerful abroad, and trying to reshape international order.91 For these reasons, China is a country that Canadians need to understand and engage with, now more than ever.

91 https://thecic.org/50-years-of-canada-china-relations-complexity-and-misperception/
About the CIC

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