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Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology
Working Papers

Halle/Saale 2010
ISSN 1615-4568

Working Paper No. 120

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Arrighi in Beijing, Stalin in Urumchi: The Political Economy of Xinjiang’s Crisis
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Abstract

The extraordinary growth rates of China’s ‘reform socialist’ economy have helped to pay for large-scale transfers to the country’s underdeveloped regions under the Great Western Development Drive, launched in 2000. Yet violence in Tibet in 2008 was followed in July 2009 by major rioting in Xinjiang. Drawing on the recent work of Giovanni Arrighi and on fieldwork dating back to the 1980s, in this paper I explore the deeper causes of the 2009 crisis in Xinjiang. These are to be found in contemporary political economy, but also in imperial history and the system of ethnic classification, which Mao adapted from the Soviet Union, specifically in categorical principles originally formulated by Stalin.

1 An earlier version of the paper was presented to the Oberseminar Ethnologie of the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich on 23rd November 2009. I am grateful to Martin Sökefeld for his invitation and hospitality, and to all the participants. Thanks also to Ildikó Bellér-Hann, Dittmar Schorkowitz, and Stephen Gudeman for numerous comments and suggestions, most of which I have tried to implement.

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Preface

Exactly six months ago, on 5th July 2009, less than three months before the celebrations to mark the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic, almost 200 people were killed in Urumchi, capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. It was the worst “ethnic rioting” ever seen in China. The result was a massive clampdown by the authorities, which included the cutting of telephone and internet links between Xinjiang and the rest of the world. The authorities attributed responsibility primarily to the international Uyghur diaspora, in particular its leader Rabiyä Qadir. Those who provoked the violence against Han Chinese, most of them young Uyghur peasants from the south of the region, were brought to trial from late summer onwards, by which time international media interest had declined. By now, many have been executed.

I travelled to China later in July 2009 in order to participate in the 16th Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, which was organized in Kunming, on the campus of Yunnan University. Yunnan is the south-western province where China’s ethnic diversity is most pronounced. Congress participants were encouraged to visit model communities, enjoy music and dance performances by the minorities, and admire their colourful costumes. Posters and ubiquitous banners and slogans proclaimed ethnic harmony, evoking the familial and neo-Confucian rhetoric which has been much repeated by socialist power holders in recent years. The contrast in Xinjiang, where I stayed for four weeks after the Congress, could hardly have been more grim. I have described some of these experiences in a recent contribution to *Anthropology Today*, based largely on the diary I kept during August (Hann 2009b).

In this paper I try to step back and examine not the specific “triggers” of last year’s crisis, but the long-term factors and the policies which have been implemented towards minorities in the last sixty years. I shall give some detail of my recent rural fieldwork, though this was necessarily located in an exceptionally stable district. My work has focused on the domestic economy and on what I term the moral economy of the community. The challenge to the anthropologist is how to connect work at this level to much wider contexts of political economy and historical sociology.
Introduction: the geocultural scenario of Giovanni Arrighi

While most economic and educational indicators suggest that Chinese socialist ethnic policies have been an impressive success, the events of 2008 and 2009 show that evidently not all is as harmonious as claimed in the rhetoric of President Hu Jintao. Especially among the Tibetans and the Uyghurs, policies of recognition and the emphasis on a territorial homeland have fostered aspirations which cannot be satisfied by stepping up support for folklore and building ever larger ethnic museums and theme parks. In these regions, the evidence which power holders present as proof of progress and integration is interpreted locally in terms of assimilation. These tensions constrain the possibilities for anthropological research, for Chinese and foreign scholars alike.

In this paper I use the comparative historical sociology of Giovanni Arrighi as a foil to my limited ethnography. His last major work (Arrighi 2007) is both the culmination of his historical sociology and a penetrating analysis of the political economy of the contemporary world. Contrary to common stereotypes of an ever more homogenized, “flatter” world (as in much discussion of globalization), and contrary also to the vision of capitalist expansion sketched by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, Arrighi comes down on the side of enduring civilizational difference. He finds theoretical inspiration in Adam Smith, who was greatly impressed by the vast domestic market of eighteenth century China (Smith 1961). Arrighi considers it essential to distinguish “between the development of a market economy and capitalist development proper” (2007: 24). The latter involves the extraction of profit through class conflict in what Marx termed the “hidden abodes” of production, where the direct producers have lost control over the means of production. Arrighi believes that this has not yet taken place in rural China, where egalitarian access to the land leaves open non-capitalist development options. Contrary to Robert Brenner, Arrighi therefore finds a Smithian approach more helpful than a focus on capitalist class analysis. The advanced condition of the social division of labour of preindustrial China was perceived by Smith as the “natural” path of development, in comparison with the “unnatural” path of Western European countries such as Holland, dependent on colonial expansion and international trade, which were in turn made possible only by military superiority (2007: 57). According to Arrighi, it was precisely this military superiority which enabled the unnatural form of Western capitalism to prevail in the nineteenth century, overtaking and subjugating the more peaceful, less imperialist market economies of East Asia. This domination continued until the second half of the twentieth century. In our time the remarkable ascent of China, combined with the catastrophic failure of George Bush Junior’s attempt to engineer a new world empire under the “racketeer” degenerate financial capitalism of the US, has placed us on the brink of being able to realize Smith’s vision of 1776, in which another civilization can attain economic parity with our own.

In elaborating this attractive vision of civilizational pluralism, Arrighi engages closely with the arguments of Andre Gunder Frank, the friend who predeceased him, notably Frank (1998). He also leans heavily on contemporaries in various disciplines, among them the historians Kenneth Pomeranz (2000) and Kaoru Sugihara (2003). He reiterates his disagreement with Robert Brenner (1977) concerning the primacy of agrarian class relations in explaining the origins of modern

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1 I borrow the term “geocultural scenario” from Ulf Hannerz, who applies it in discussing best-selling anglophone public intellectuals such as Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama (lecture at the MPI for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, 7th January 2010). Arrighi may not enjoy the same level of airport bookstore recognition, but scenarios offered from the political left seldom do.
capitalism, and supplements his account of Adam Smith with insights from Marx, Schumpeter, Polanyi and many others. Arrighi is well read in many periods of Chinese history, from Mark Elvin’s (1973) diagnosis of the “high-level equilibrium trap” in the imperial era to the latest efforts to combat corruption in the Communist Party. But his theorizing extends beyond China to East Asia generally. Arrighi adapts Sugihara’s application to Japan of the idea of an “industrious revolution”. He argues that East Asian development paths have always prioritized people, their communities and their house economies. By contrast the industrial revolution brought about by Western capitalists has emphasized machines and been profligate with the natural resources of the planet. The moral message is that the West must now learn from East Asia in this respect, or at least work towards a new “hybrid”.

Arrighi finds hope in China’s booming market economy of recent decades, which in his view may no longer be socialist in any meaningful sense but is not yet clearly capitalist either. He rejects David Harvey’s analysis of “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” (2005). The communist leadership has pursued Smithian policies to encourage competition and foreign direct investment, but unlike Russia, privatization in China has been a gradual process. The government has given priority to the “national interest” and especially to the development of “the domestic market and the improvement of living conditions in rural areas” (Arrighi 2007: 361). China’s peasantry (a population much larger than the entire population of the EU), far from being dispossessed, has been enabled to pursue paths of “primitive accumulation”. Arrighi goes on to extol “the extraordinary social achievements of the Mao era” (ibid: 370). Thanks to its “revolutionary tradition”, he claims that the subaltern stratum of the peasantry is nowadays increasingly self-confident in pursuing its interests. These arguments are taken not from authors with first-hand knowledge of rural China but from international political economist Samir Amin (2005). Neither here nor elsewhere in a text of almost 400 pages does Giovanni Arrighi make significant use of the contributions of anthropologists. I shall return to this point at the end.

Xinjiang: historical background and regional political economy

Xinjiang is a complex region, positioned between Han Chinese civilization and Islamic Central Asia, or rather constituted by a fuzzy overlap of the two (Bellér-Hann et al. 2007). The settlement pattern has been decisively shaped in the past by its ecological extremes. Today it is shaped more directly by the location of oil, gas and mineral resources. Han Chinese presence can be traced back thousands of years but most Western historians agree that imperial power was consolidated politically only in the middle of the eighteenth century, not long before Adam Smith wrote The Wealth of Nations (Millward 1998). In the first half of the twentieth century this “pivot of Asia” (Lattimore 1950) was highly unstable. In the 1940s Stalin’s USSR was the dominant power in much of the region, backing the short-lived Eastern Turkistan Republic (ETR).

Stalin was still in power when Chairman Mao set up the PRC’s system of “nesting” nominal autonomies for minority nationalities (minzu) after 1949. Since 1955 Xinjiang has been known officially as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Of course power remains concentrated in Beijing, and it is exercised locally by Party secretaries who are almost invariably Han. Uyghurs still formed more than 80% of the region’s population in the 1940s (Toops 2004: 245). Due to massive Han immigration, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, they are nowadays
barely more numerous than the Han. When allowance is made for military forces stationed in the region and the “floating” population of temporary workers, it is possible that the Han now outnumber the Uyghur in their own homeland. Several other minzu are also Muslim. The Hui (Tungans or Chinese Muslims) have a long history here, primarily as traders, and they remain conspicuous in the small business sector. The Kazaks and Kyrgyz are Turkic-speaking pastoral groups large enough to have their own educational institutions in the areas where they are concentrated. Altogether 13 nationalities are recognized in the XUAR, most of them very small.

To understand the fundamental tension between the Uyghurs and the Han today we need to consider both the long-term history and the paradoxical role of socialist minority policies in cementing a sense of identity and territorial belonging. The latter were closely modelled on Soviet precedents, though Mao was careful to insist that China would remain a unified multi-ethnic state, in contrast to the federal nature of the USSR and of Russia today. The option of secession was never even toyed with in the Chinese case. The boundaries settled for Soviet Central Asia at the Tashkent conference in 1921 are almost identical to those which today divide the various independent Muslim countries of the region. Although local agency in this unique colonial situation on the periphery of both Russian and Han empires should not be overlooked, it was power holders in Moscow who authorized and to a considerable degree created the ethnic entities which are largely taken nowadays by their members to be primordial. This applies both to the former Soviet republics and to the Uyghurs of Xinjiang, whose ethnonym was definitively recognized at the same Tashkent conference. Native elites suffered brutally, and the collectivization drives of the 1930s were a tragedy. Yet the early decades of the USSR also witnessed programmes of “affirmative action” to promote economic development and educational levels in peripheral regions. China after 1950 exhibited similar patterns. In Xinjiang, as elsewhere in China, anthropologists were mobilized to continue pre-socialist efforts to classify and name ethnic minorities and, wherever possible, allocate them to territories. As the largest indigenous group, the Uyghurs benefited from the standardization of the Turkic dialects and the setting up of Uyghur schools throughout the region. Of course Uyghur ranked below Mandarin in terms of the career paths it opened, inside and outside the XUAR; but it became the lingua franca for most of those who did not identify as Han or Hui. Uyghur children were taught that this was their homeland, just as in the USSR their closest neighbours the Uzbeks were made aware of the territorial basis of their national identity.

It was perhaps inevitable that tensions in Xinjiang would increase after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only did Uzbekistan gain independence: so too did Soviet republics that were much smaller than Xinjiang, and endowed (in the eyes of the Uyghurs) with less distinguished histories of literate civilization. The Uyghurs have not lost their fundamental sense of identity as Muslims (though most have no knowledge of their legal school, or even that they are Sunni). Attachments to the local oasis remain strong and shape interaction even in new urban concentrations, especially in Urumchi. But for the great majority of the Uyghur, a sense of national belonging has become paramount. After the bloodshed of 5th July 2009, it was possible to see in some Western newspapers maps which showed the Turkic groups as lozenges confined to the south and west of their so-called Autonomous Region. Such cartography is problematic. Large zones of Xinjiang are almost unpopulated, but an obscure Muslim shrine or a pre-Muslim burial ground in the desert suffice as proof of the antiquity of their rights for today’s Uyghurs (see Bellér-Hann, forthcoming). The history of their people in this region is extremely complicated and hardly taught at all in
schools. Yet the socialist state has over the last half century, simply by recognizing the Uyghurs as the titular nationality, done much to promote that sense of a territorial homeland. Through its mass educational provision and the expansion of modern media, the state, far from eliminating nationalities as its leaders originally intended, has been instrumental in disseminating a sense of Uyghur national identity that relatively few possessed before the Liberation (Gladney 2004).

In the 1990s, following Deng Xiaoping’s famous journey to the south and his call to resume the path of market expansion, strenuous efforts were made to integrate the XUAR more effectively into the market economy of the country. By the end of the century even Kashgar was accessible by rail. The Great Western Development Drive (GWDD), launched in 2000, was the next coordinated effort by the state to improve infrastructure and redress regional inequalities. According to Henryk Szadziewski (2007: 23), the benefits of the GWDD accrued to 71% of the country’s territory, containing 28% of its population and producing 17% of its GDP. In the case of Xinjiang these regional policies were an intensification of the course followed in the 1990s. Both decades have witnessed impressive rates of economic growth, yet there has also been an intensification of ethnic conflict. This is a puzzle to many Han, who continue to view their role in the periphery of their state as a mission civilisatrice (Harrell 1997). Echoing the sentiments which used to be heard in European Russia towards the Central Asian territories of the USSR, many Han ask innocently ‘why are these people so ungrateful, when we are doing so much for them?’

There is no doubt that the GWDD has brought significant improvements in infrastructure, from which all inhabitants benefit (e.g. in the transport network). Average income levels in the XUAR are above those of most Chinese provinces. The gap between town and countryside is smaller than elsewhere (Wiener 2004). In the light of this evidence and continuing generous transfers from the centre, the model of a crudely extractive “internal colonialism” seems no more appropriate for the case of Xinjiang than it was in the case of Soviet Central Asia (Sautman 2000).

An alternative diagnosis would be that Adam Smith’s model of the “natural” domestic market, after an interlude of almost two centuries, is finally able to expand to fill the space demarcated by the boundaries fixed by the Qing in the middle of the eighteenth century. The problem with this model is that the social context of the reform socialist economy is still so very different in Xinjiang. The differences cannot be reduced to class categories. Certainly it is the ethnic factor which dominates for the actors. The fact is that the “modern” jobs in the XUAR have been taken overwhelmingly by immigrant Han. In the absence of small-scale private industry, most capital investment depends on the state. PetroChina is a joint stock company (Shell has a big stake in the pipeline it has built to Shanghai) but Calla Wiemer notes that “profits from the mineral and energy sector in Xinjiang accrue in significant measure to the central government rather than to the region” (2004: 174). Regional analysis shows that non-Han predominate in the poorer regions of the XUAR. In state and cooperative units they have only 30.1% of “staff and worker” (zhi gong) jobs, though they form 59.4% of the population. When attention is focused on “central agency posts”, the non-Han proportion drops to 11% (ibid). It goes without saying that in all significant institutions the key post of Party Secretary is held by a Han. Whereas over 80% of the Uyghur population is engaged in agriculture, the proportion for the Xinjiang Han is only 3.8% (Rong 2003, cited in Szadziewski 2007: 33). In the cities there is a strong inverse relation between the size of the Uyghur component and income per capita (Szadziewski 2007: 34). Szadziewski concludes that the GWDD has so far been a “top-down” development initiative, not yet supplemented by
significant local participation, and “in terms of education, health and employment rights, Uyghurs lag far behind their Han counterparts” (2007: 50).

**Domestic and Moral Economy in Qumul**

Let me now turn to the region where Ildikó Bellér-Hann and I have carried out nine months fieldwork in the period 2006–2009. Qumul is the easternmost oasis on the Xinjiang section of the Silk Road. Until 1930, the district was ruled by a Muslim dynasty which maintained close relations with power holders in Beijing. Unlike southern Xinjiang it has been overwhelmingly peaceful in recent decades, which of course is the main reason why we were allowed to do fieldwork here. This has much to do with the demographic profile. Qumul was two thirds Uyghur in the 1940s, but nowadays it is over two thirds Han. However, our fieldwork was carried out in two rural townships (one in the oasis adjacent to the modern city, and the other sixty kilometres distant in the Eastern Tian Shan Mountains) which remain overwhelmingly Uyghur. The only Han encounters in these townships are local government cadres and policemen.

Unless they are lucky enough to have some familial links to the city, most Uyghur peasants have little choice but to engage in subsistence-oriented agriculture, which they try to supplement with animal breeding and petty trading. Small sums are earned in the mountain villages by growing beans as a cash crop. The environment of the oasis enables higher yields and is favourable for cotton as well as grapes and other fruits, but since land is much scarcer, here too many farming households have little opportunity to grow more than the wheat which they themselves will consume. Since the early 1980s, when the land was distributed in egalitarian parcels, the household has again been the key unit of production and consumption. Hardly anyone has a good word to say about the collectivism of the Maoist years, when Uyghur religious practices and gender rules were disrupted and they were often hungry. The last three decades have seen a far-reaching restoration of the older moral economy, much of it based on the mosque. There is very little cooperation in production, but solidarity is reinforced, for men and women separately and for the community as a whole through participation in many kinds of ritual.

Some of these rituals, and especially weddings, have become very expensive. Villagers need cash to improve their homes according to new tastes. For the majority of the peasant population, televisions, refrigerators and even motorcycles are still luxuries, but they are increasingly keen to emulate urban consumption habits. Yet the opportunities for accumulation, especially in the mountainous locations, are as negligible as the opportunities for political participation. In the communities where I worked, only the driver who provided a daily minibus service to the oasis centre was steadily expanding his business. Many peasants had had some success in expanding the size of their flocks, but this had come at the expense of serious pasture degradation and villagers knew that it was not sustainable (degradation takes different but no less serious forms in the oasis, where the water table has fallen dramatically in recent years). There are no rural enterprises to provide employment. Many young men work for two months each year as labourers on the large farms of the plains, where they harvest cotton or grapes. The officials and permanent workers at these large farms (many of them bingtuan, the paramilitary organisations which have played a

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4 This work was undertaken in collaboration with partners at Xinjiang University. I thank Arslan Abdulla, Rahilä Dawut, Ayxe Eli and Sawut Pawan for extending generous help in conditions that were often very awkward. I hope that one day we shall succeed in organising the joint workshop which was postponed twice for political reasons in 2008 and 2009.
major role in developing agriculture in the socialist era) are mostly Han. During my fieldwork in 2006–2007 men could occasionally earn supplementary income through planting roadside trees for the authorities; for this backbreaking work in the desert they were paid on a piece rate basis (see Hann 2009a).

Just a short distance away from these Uyghur townships, everyone is well aware of the existence of another world: the “oil city” which PetroChina has built in the desert outside Qumul. This settlement consists of some 5,000–6,000 Han immigrants. It has better accommodation, superior shopping facilities and schools, and even native speakers to teach the English language to executives of the company as well as the children privileged to attend its schools. The company argues that for highly skilled work in the energy sector it must rely on highly qualified labour, which is not to be found locally. Officials are more reluctant to admit that they also hire only Han even for the most menial jobs; sometimes this too is justified with reference to the inability of most Uyghurs to communicate effectively in the language of the state.5

Stalin in Urumchi

Urumchi, capital of the XUAR, has marketed itself in recent years as the capital of Central Eurasia: according to its public relations, no city of its size (the population is now well in excess of two million) is further removed from the sea. Historically it was not an important Uyghur settlement at all, but a minor trading post. Its central location facilitated rapid expansion at the end of the Qing dynasty and under a series of warlords thereafter. In the socialist era it became the seat of the regional parliament and of several universities and Uyghur cultural institutions – and it is also of course the hub of the regional economy. All the complexities of the region are condensed here. One sees vividly, for example, that not all Muslims are alike. The Hui seldom attend the same mosques as the Uyghurs. If some Uyghurs are still reluctant to see their children marry a Kazak or a Kyrgyz, on the basis of the ancient disdain held by the cultivated oasis dwellers for peoples associated with pastoral nomadism, intermarriage between any of these Turkic groups and the Han or Hui remains extremely rare. The main “hybrid” group is made up of Uyghur who attend Chinese schools and become fluent in Mandarin (Smith Finley 2007). Such “half-Uyghur”, as they are sometimes pejoratively labelled by other Uyghur, are often able to pursue more successful careers, but they may pay a heavy price in terms of alienation from their natal community; in the wake of the recent violence, these minkaohan may have difficulty in finding a spouse in either community.

When we look more closely at these complexities, in Urumchi and in Xinjiang as a whole, Arrighi’s theoretical edifice is suspect, even for the period of Chinese history in which he is most at home, the late imperial centuries. Following Adam Smith, he clings to a few binary oppositions: extroverted versus introverted, unnatural versus natural, West versus East. Chinese expansion in the “western regions” is played down on the grounds that it ceased in the mid-eighteenth century and had no inherent self-reinforcing dynamic (Arrighi 2007: 317–318). Czarist expansion in Northern Asia, by contrast, is assimilated to the “Western” pattern of competitive territorial aggrandizement and plunder. This is to ignore the fact that the Russian and Chinese varieties of

5 The authorities have long recognised this problem. The solution is seen to lie in improving the teaching of Mandarin at all levels of Uyghur schooling. Success to date has been limited (Rong 2003). Native Han teachers are generally reluctant to live in Uyghur settlements, but the problem is being tackled by bussing them out from the oasis centre.
“continental colonialism” had a good deal in common, even before their denouement in the twenty century convergences of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist socialism.6

To understand the history and political economy of Xinjiang over the last hundred years, I suggest that Josep Stalin is a more consistently helpful guide than Adam Smith and Giovanni Arrighi. His significance can be considered in three phases. The first derives from his 1913 essay on the “national question”, which provided an enduring definition of the nation and a charter for its existence and persistence under socialism, despite its apparent contradiction of the primary categories of Marxist analysis (Gladney 2004: 111). According to the young Stalin (himself a native of Georgia), a nation is “a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (1954: 308). Stalin himself played a key role in implementing this charter as Lenin’s Commissar for Nationalities in the early years of the USSR, when its federal structures were decisively shaped (even if the initially promised right to secede quickly became nominal). As noted, the recognition they received according to the Stalinist criteria at the Tashkent meeting of 1921 was a key moment in the emergence of modern Uyghur identity.

The second period in which Josep Vissarionovich Stalin played a vital role was at the very end of his life, which coincided with the first years of the PRC. Abandoning his earlier support for a separate political entity in the form of the ETR, Stalin connived in the new system built up by Mao. This resembled the Soviet Union in its principles of nesting autonomies, but it followed Chinese imperial tradition in stressing the unitary character of the state. This rejection of federalism was arguably closer to what Stalin would personally have preferred to institutionalize in the USSR a generation earlier. In any case, until the split of 1960 the Soviet Union remained a generous ally to China and the architecture of the capital of the XUAR reflected Stalinist styles.

Stalin’s final appearance in my narrative is more metaphorical. I interpret the massive violence of 5th July 2009 in Urumchi, regardless of the specific factors which triggered it inside and outside Xinjiang, as conclusive evidence of the failure of the policies of social and economic integration which have made Urumchi such a remarkable boom town in the decades of the reform socialist economy. Stability could only be restored by a massive heavy-handed intervention by the security forces. If the climate in Beijing and other eastern cities has remained predominantly liberal and relaxed in recent years, conditions in Urumchi are now repressive, “Stalinist” in the popular sense of the term. Given the progress made in developing business links to neighbouring Central Asian states, this has been a disaster for the regional market economy (much more serious than the equivalent crackdown in 2008 in Tibet, an economy that relies mainly on tourism, where the suspension of banking services had little impact on the real economy). But the events of 2009 have been first and foremost a human tragedy for all the peoples of the XUAR, and above all for the Uyghurs.

Conclusion

In this paper I have sketched some of the background to the recent violence in the XUAR. I have paid little attention to religion, because observers have been in general agreement that Islam did not

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6 I take the concept of “continental colonialism” from Dittmar Schorkowitz, who is heading a new Focus Group at the MPI in Halle to pursue exactly this kind of comparison. See the homepage: http://www.eth.mpg.de/Socialist and Postsocialist Eurasia/Historical Anthropology in Eurasia/Dittmar Schorkowitz.
play any direct role in the bloody events of 5th July 2009. Instead I have emphasized the *longue durée* of imperial history, and more specifically the intersection of post-Mao political economy, with the persistence of Maoist-Stalinist ethnic classification. I have tried to show that even village level ethnographic work can shed light on these large issues. The villagers of Qumul were not involved in the violence and are materially better off than the Uyghur peasants in southern Xinjiang, probably the main agents on the streets of Urumchi. However, even in the stable eastern districts there is a strong perception among Uyghur villagers of ethnically based exclusion and relative deprivation which contradict the statistics documenting an absolute rise in their living standards in recent decades. The failure of the GWDD to address the needs and aspirations of the Uyghurs suggests a deeper flaw in the theorizing of Giovanni Arrighi. Xinjiang is part of China too, but neither in the past nor in the present can it be treated as just another region of a unified national market. The social context of this market is very different. As Brenner (1977) insisted, the local social structure matters, and this is where anthropological expertise becomes relevant. The continuing internal antagonisms of the Chinese variant of “continental colonialism” demand a more complex comparative investigation than contrasting “natural” paths of development in East Asia with the “unnatural” paths of the West.

If my discussion of the late Giovanni Arrighi has become critical, he was surely the sort of scholar who would have welcomed this. My basic point is that his historical sociology needs supplementing with anthropology – preferably with many kinds of anthropology. To begin with, he could integrate the ultra-*longue durée* accounts of Jack Goody, who has recently (Goody 2010) synthesized his arguments for approaching East and West in the unified framework of Eurasia. With only slightly less ambitious time horizons, Hill Gates (1996) has explored the material foundations of the links between domestic and political economy that underpin China’s variant of the East Asian path over the last thousand years. Finally, at the micro level, I have argued that even statistically unrepresentative ethnographies of rural communities in Qumul can provide useful insights. Arrighi’s Beijing cannot stand for the whole of China. True, he seeks to include the rural masses in his vision, but he has little to say about the cities and his generalizations about labour migration and an increasingly self-confident peasantry do not stand up to scrutiny. His exaggerations of the accomplishments of the Maoist era take no account of how those decades were perceived by the peasants who had to endure them. Arrighi is similarly naïve when he picks up Samir Amin’s idea of “accumulation without dispossession”. The fact that the means of production remain largely under domestic control is indeed extremely important for the new/old moral economy of the community, but it must also be recognized that in vast areas of rural China the opportunities for these peasants to pursue “primitive accumulation” by traditional East Asian labour-intensive methods in the house economy are close to zero.

Members of all ethnic groups, especially the young, are attracted by new consumer goods and subcultures. In this sense, the market has indeed made tremendous inroads. However, compared to the poor peasants of Han regions who “float” in search of jobs in the booming regions of the coast, rural Uyghurs are still handicapped by the fact that few have adequate command of Mandarin to set off independently to try their luck on the national labour market. The Uyghurs have a reputation for their commercial acumen and some have been able to practice this with visible success. But this association with money and the market has made them the focus of Han resentment when their networks spread outside Xinjiang, while inside their home region they remain severely
handicapped in competing with the Han for secure jobs. As a result the goal of social integration has proved more elusive than consumer-led market integration. Some, a tiny, desperate minority, have taken recourse to extreme violence. Of course the majority of the Uyghurs will continue to maintain peaceful relations, even with new Han immigrants who show no respect for or interest in Uyghur customs. Empirical surveys in Urumchi have confirmed that peace and tolerance of the other in everyday life are the predominant values on both sides (Yang n.d.). However, Uyghurs are sometimes keen to point out that many of these new arrivals will not stay in the XUAR for longer than a few years, since they will never be able to feel at home in this very different environment and are bound to gravitate naturally back to their home regions. The great majority of the Uyghurs now have an unshakeable conviction, ironically strengthened by the socialist nationalities policy, that they belong to the Uyghur nation, rather than to a village or oasis, that this nation has its unique culture (in Stalin’s sense), and that Xinjiang is ultimately their Uyghur homeland. Arrighi’s Smithian narrative has no way of grasping this transformation of identity, yet it could turn out to be rather significant for the future of the reform socialist path in China.
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