



Photographs by ALICE SU Los Angeles Times

**LOCAL WOMEN** stand on a street in Ürümqi, the capital of northwestern China's Xinjiang region.

# XINJIANG CAMP SURVIVORS SPEAK

Uighurs are surveilled, face forced labor in homeland.

By Alice Su

**U**RUMQI, CHINA — The car drove toward a site visible by satellite but not marked on Chinese maps. It lay hidden in the mountains along a desolate road lined with Islamic cemeteries. The car traveled south as a red sun sank over snow-blanketed peaks, turning tombstones to silhouettes.

Night was coming to Xinjiang. The car approached a police tower guarding the Hongyan Clothing Park compound. A slogan appeared on the building's walls: "Forget not the Party's mercy, walk with the Party forever." In an instant, police and men in dark clothing sprinted toward the car, surrounding the reporters inside.

"Delete everything," one of the men ordered. The reporters complied and left, only to be stopped twice more by cars that swerved in front and beside them, letting out minders who demanded double-checks of the journalists' phones and cameras.

This was territory Chinese authorities did not want the outside world to see: evidence against President Xi Jinping's claims of bringing mass "happiness" to the northwestern region of Xinjiang, where a vast system of surveillance, detention, cultural erasure and forced



**ACCESS TO** a residential compound in Ürümqi is controlled by turnstiles, a facial recognition system and guards inside.

labor has devastated the Uighur people in their homeland.

On a recent weeklong trip across Xinjiang, a Times reporter and a colleague working for a German outlet visited more than a dozen prisons, detention centers, demolished mosque sites and former reeducation camps turned into high-security factories. The Times met with Uighurs — they are predominantly Muslim — who spoke of their imprisonment, fear and life in the region.

The Chinese government’s tactics in Xinjiang are the culmination of tensions that have simmered since the Mao era, when the state sponsored a massive influx of Han Chinese settlers. The repression that followed led to deadly riots and Uighur attacks on police and civilians, some of which were claimed by a separatist movement.

In 2017, the Chinese government forced more than a million Uighurs, Kazakhs and other ethnic minorities into indoctrination camps in what authorities described as a “counter-terrorism” strategy. But many swept into that system had no ties to extremist or separatist groups.

Jevlan Shirmemmet, 29, a Uighur who left China as a student in 2011 and is now a tour guide in Istanbul, Turkey, lost contact with his parents and brother when they were taken to the camps in 2018. Only in June this year did he hear from his father, who called from a police station. His first sentence after two years was not a greeting, but an accusation that his son had joined “troublesome groups” abroad. Shirmemmet was shocked.

He hadn’t joined any political movements, he told his father. “This was my father’s mouth,” Shirmemmet said, “but it was the Xinjiang authorities and public security speaking through him.”

His mother, he was told, had been sent to prison — probably because she visited him in Turkey in 2013. When Shirmemmet asked the Chinese Embassy in Turkey for proof of her trial or conviction, they suggested he instead write a list of his activities and contacts abroad. “If you can figure out where you did wrong, tell us,” an embassy official told him.

Shirmemmet’s parents were civil servants who taught him to speak fluent Mandarin and avoid politics. But being Uighur, he said, made him a target for the Communist Party. “They reached their hands into my family, strangled us and wouldn’t let us go,” he said of the party. “As long as you are Uighur, you are political.”

In Xinjiang today, cameras hang over every street and inside every taxi, sending video to the police. Residential compounds are watched by facial recognition systems, security guards and pandemic QR codes that are scanned at every entry or exit. Police in flak jackets stand at bus stops, stores and ubiquitous “convenience stations” that often have large portraits of Xi surrounded by happy children, smiling through the windows.

Whatever technology misses, humans report. Inside a Uighur store near Urumqi’s grand bazaar, a document on the wall listed 10 Uighur names and phone numbers linking nearby stores together, along with instructions to spread party doctrine, watch for outsiders and monitor acts threatening “social stability.” In a village on the outskirts of Kashgar, posters announced an upcoming disciplinary inspection of local cadres and welcomed villagers to report any suspicious behavior of the cadres.

Several Uighur villages the reporters visited near Kashgar and Korla appeared empty. Signs were posted on doors stating that the locks had been changed because residents had been absent for too long. Murals portrayed Uighur women bursting out of black veils into colorful clothing and a giant ax chopping Uighurs holding an East Turkestan flag — a symbol for Xinjiang independence — into pieces.

Every day, the two reporters were summoned off trains and planes upon arrival. They were registered, photographed and given coronavirus tests by police. Their car was tailed by several vehicles and men who sometimes called police to stop them. At times, the men manhandled the journalists.

During one confrontation in a village outside Korla, an official blurted: “You can’t speak with the people here. We’ve had too many negative reports from outside. You can only speak with the people we arrange.” Talking to locals would create a “security problem,” he said.

What the minders preferred to present of Xinjiang was an illusion of normality: Uighurs mingled with Han Chinese at the night market in Kashgar. They invited shoppers to eat samples at a naan museum in Urumqi. They sang about ethnic unity and “never splitting apart” in slick music videos played at tourist sites.

In Korla, minders led reporters to a plaza to watch dozens of mostly middle-age Han Chinese residents wearing Uighur costumes, dancing to a Uighur song. “Aren’t these uncles and aunties cute?” one of the minders said.

Behind these performances lies a years-long program to eradicate Uighur heritage and replace it with Han Chinese culture and obedience to the Communist Party. More than



**MANY MOSQUES** in Korla, Xinjiang, have been destroyed, but The Times saw one left standing. Its Islamic features had been removed, its name changed and its facade covered with a sign that said: “Love the Party, Love the Nation.”



**MURALS ON** the walls of a village near Korla, Xinjiang, showed women bursting out of dark veils into colorful clothing. Another mural that minders obstructed The Times from photographing showed a large ax chopping Uighurs holding a flag associated with the region’s independence into pieces.

10,000 mosques, shrines and other cultural sites have been razed, according to satellite imagery analyses. The few left standing as tourist sites have mostly had Islamic features carved off or covered up with signs declaring: “Love the Party, Love the Nation.”

Since 2016, the Chinese government has also sent more than 1 million party cadres into ethnic minorities’ homes in Xinjiang to “become family,” a program that purports to promote ethnic unity but spies on and indoctrinates minorities.

A 2018 manual posted online for such visits instructed cadres to observe Uighur homes for signs of extremism, such as receiving outside visitors, religious hangings on walls, or watching videodiscs instead of television. If they weren’t sure of the Uighurs’ honesty, they could question the children, the manual suggested: “Children don’t lie.”

Those who visited overseas websites, used unapproved apps and shared anything from such sites with others were guilty of “preparing to commit terror crimes and inciting ethnic hatred,” the manual said. Cadres should explain to families of violators: “Such activity harms national security. The party and government are punishing him to educate and save him, or else this path would lead to destruction.”

Dozens of cadres have also posted diaries online describing villagers obediently attending flag-raising ceremonies and sitting on plastic stools in front of the police station, where they swear allegiance to the party and vow to root out “two-faced people,” a euphemism for disloyal minorities. Many entries feature images of families waving party flags and singing patriotic songs.

In a diary entry from a village near Atush in 2017, a cadre wrote about the party secretary lecturing families of people punished for participating in unsanctioned religious activities. “Although your family members committed mistakes, the party and government have not forgotten you,” the party secretary said, then gave each family two sacks of fertilizer.

Many Uighur families were moved to tears, the cadre claimed: “The party secretary was very happy, all village cadres were very happy, the police were also happy, and the villagers were even happier.”

Ever lurking in the background of such “happiness” are the camps, prisons and factories.

Government documents leaked to newspapers and human rights organizations have revealed how Xinjiang authorities incarcerated minorities en masse in a system of “preventive” security. The documents have shown that the internment camps are run with com-

mands to “teach like a school, be managed like the military, and be defended like a prison.”

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, or ASPI, has identified at least 380 suspected detention facilities in Xinjiang, based on satellite imagery and official construction documents. Some facilities were decommissioned in 2019 after Chinese authorities declared that all “students” had “graduated” from “vocational training centers.”

But new, higher-security facilities were built in 2019 and 2020 and are still being expanded, while the Uighur diaspora has reported of family members being sent from camps to prison with sentences of seven to 25 years.

In one neighborhood north of Urumqi, The Times visited a cluster of six prisons built within a two-mile radius. The floor space in their residential buildings had quadrupled since 2016, according to satellite image analysis by ASPI. They were surrounded by high concrete walls and barbed-wire fences, with guard dogs barking in the snow and military police patrolling between watchtowers.

Some reeducation camps appear to have been transformed into labor facilities. Satellite images from 2018 of the Hongyan Clothing Park visited by The Times show that the compound had newly built features similar to those of known detention camps: internal walls and extensive wire fencing separating the buildings, with four distinct yards attached to the one block.

When The Times visited this month, the compound had been altered, with internal walls and fences removed and a basketball court added to the floor. Chinese cultural motifs were painted on a white wall around its outside.

The Times found only one company registered to the Hongyan site: Xinjiang Bailangqing Garments Ltd., established in November 2020, according to online records. Its main shareholder and legal representative, Cheng Jianghuai, is an executive of garment companies across Xinjiang. State media have lauded Cheng for his participation in “poverty alle-



Google Earth

**SATELLITE IMAGERY** of a suspected detention site near Urumqi, China, in October 2018 shows internal walls and extensive wire fencing, with four distinct yards attached to one block.



Google Earth

**SATELLITE IMAGERY** of the same site in August 2020 shows that internal walls and fencing have been removed, with a basketball court painted on the ground. A visit by The Times in December 2020 found that the site had been converted into a garment production facility with a police watchtower in front.

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viation” programs that place ethnic minorities in factories — a system that rights groups, academics and the U.S. government criticized as forced labor.

Reached by telephone, Cheng said that he was the company’s legal representative, but he was not responsible for its day-to-day operations. “It’s a unit belonging to the government,” he said. Asked whether he could explain what happens at the Hongyan site, Cheng said: “I can’t explain. It’s confidential,” and hung up.

Xinjiang authorities did not respond to requests for further comment.

One morning before sunrise, a Times reporter evaded the minders and entered the home of a prominent Uighur intellectual. Like hundreds of other Uighur scholars, poets, doctors, journalists and other intellectuals who were once honored for their preservation of Uighur culture, he has been cut off from the outside world since 2017.

He stood in a traditional embroidered green skullcap, his daughter still in pajamas beside him. A state TV broadcast played on the television behind them.

“This is what they always warn us against,” the daughter said. But they agreed to speak.

Three of the intellectual’s children had been detained in 2017, the daughter said: herself, for having made a phone call abroad, and her two brothers for having studied abroad. They were taken to separate facilities with no trial or conviction of any crime. She was held in a detention facility for more than a year, then moved to a “school” with slightly better conditions, she said.

In both, she had lived in a room of more than 10 other women. Their belongings were confiscated. They had no outside contact except one three-minute phone call to their home every two months. She was not beaten, but her brothers were. They were allowed no calls through the first year.

Every day in the camps, they studied two books of Mandarin and Chinese laws and regulations, the daughter said. Those who spoke better Mandarin were made language teachers to the other detainees, many of whom were farmers.

For a year and a half, they lived without hope of release. Her father, weak with heart disease, was hospitalized several times while his children were gone — though he was not detained. Then, one day in 2019, they were suddenly let out.

“They all kept watching us after that,” she said. “The neighborhood committee, the officials, the public security, they came to our home every day.” Families like theirs, who once had contact with academic colleagues abroad, were under heightened scrutiny. They were warned to never speak to foreigners without the presence of officials.

Not everyone had been released from the camps, the daughter said. Some had been moved to factories, others to prisons. Those who were out didn’t need any more physical monitoring. Fear of return to the camps kept them silent.

Speaking Mandarin, his voice slow and thick, her father wondered why his and many other Uighur families were detained in the first place: “They are good people,” he said. “They did nothing wrong. Some died in those places. Why were they taken?”

Asked by The Times reporter for permission to write about their experiences, the father paused.

“You could write our story,” he said, turning to look at the reporter. “But after that, will they let us live?”

Journalists in China understand the country’s dark side, he said. “We Uighurs are not meant to live. We Uighurs should be erased from this earth.”

“My father is speaking out of anger,” his daughter said. They were glad to know that the outside world was paying attention to Xinjiang and that some Uighurs abroad had been reunited with their families. “But we are all here. We have no relatives outside, no escape,” the daughter said. Many Uighurs in Xinjiang no longer think of anything beyond eating, sleeping, being together and not being in the camps.

“Tell our story, but don’t use our names,” she murmured. “Please leave. I am afraid because you are here.”

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Just before the reporter left, the father stood. He grasped her hand and shook it, his back straight, his gaze steady through his tears.

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*This is the seventh in a series of occasional articles about the effect China's global power is having on nations and people's lives.*

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*This series examines how China's emerging global dominance is affecting nations, economies and lives in the Pacific Rim at a time when Beijing and Washington are entering a new Cold War.*



Photographs by ALICE SU Los Angeles Times

**ELEMENTARY SCHOOL** students in Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia, walk past a bilingual sign promoting patriotism and other “Chinese values” on Sept. 1, 2020.

# MONGOLS FEEL UNDER SIEGE

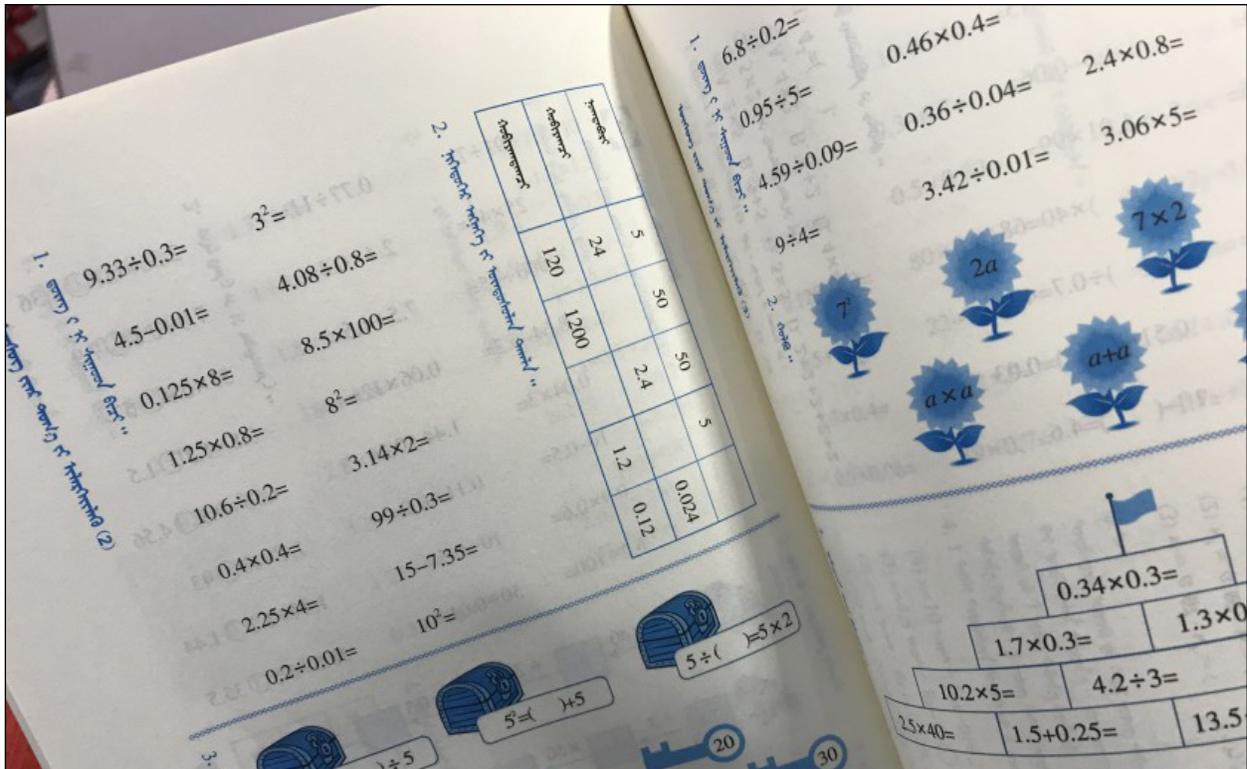
China’s Mandarin program imperils their language.

By Alice Su

**H**OHHOT, CHINA — Parents walked toward a wall of metal barriers, holding the hands of their first-graders as dozens of police and men in dark clothes watched and scowled in the afternoon light. One by one, mothers and fathers let their children go into an elementary school that seemed more ominous than it did the year before.

A grandfather stood behind a tree with tears in his eyes as students filed through metal detectors, red scarves tied around their necks, and climbed the steps toward their classrooms. “All ethnic groups must embrace tightly like the seeds of a pomegranate,” read a slogan from Chinese President Xi Jinping printed in Mandarin on the wall.

“They are talking about great ethnic unity. Is this what unity looks like?” said the Mongol grandfather, who did not give his name. He and his wife, Ochir Bao, a woman in her 60s, had come to this school — Hohhot National Experimental School, an elementary school in the region’s capital with mostly Mongol students — to watch their grandson go to class against his will.



**AN ELEMENTARY** school math textbook in Mongolian is shown. The education authorities in Inner Mongolia have promised that these textbooks will not be changed. But for three other classes — history, language and literature, and morality and law — the textbooks will change from Mongolian to Mandarin.

Their grandson had participated in a region-wide school boycott, they said, sparked by the sudden news last week that elementary and middle-schoolers across Inner Mongolia — a region of sprawling grasslands where nomad warriors once roamed that is twice the size of California and home to the descendants of Genghis Khan — would begin a program to transition half their classes from Mongolian to Mandarin.

The new “bilingual education” program, announced only days before it was implemented, has stirred resistance. Thousands of teachers, students and parents signed petitions that were shared quickly online. They wrote their full names in circles to avoid singling out any leader for punishment and stamped their fingerprints in red. Several popular Inner Mongolian bands also shared petitions on social media. Parents and teachers began discussing holding Mongolian-language classes at home.

The program was criticized as the latest attempt by the Chinese government to diminish cultural identity, similar to actions it has taken in the border regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, both historically home to non-Han Chinese ethnic groups.

The Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center, a New York-based rights group, shared dozens of videos from across the region showing students protesting on and off campuses, chanting “Protect our mother tongue,” and parents clashing with police as they tried to pick up and bring their students home.

In one video, students in matching blue and white school uniforms marched and then stood on the road with arms locked, chanting in Mongolian as a crowd around them cheered. In another, middle-schoolers pushed through police barricades at their school entrance, apparently to escape forced participation in the language program. In several videos, protesters stood on the streets singing in Mongolian, some closing their eyes and swaying as the chorus swelled: “I am Mongolian!”

The government’s response was swift. In Hohhot this week, The Times saw police vehicles, uniformed officers and plainclothes men deployed around the Inner Mongolia Normal University Affiliated Middle School, where police had stopped an earlier protest, and in front of the Hohhot National Experimental School, the elementary school where the grandparents watched for their grandson.

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Bao said her grandson had to come back to class because his parents' workplaces threatened to fire them otherwise. "We had no choice," she said. "We want our grandson to go to school, of course, but not to forget his mother tongue."

"It's too outrageous," her husband added. "What century are we living in? They've snatched away our rights."

A police source within Inner Mongolia who requested anonymity for his protection told *The Times* that security forces across the region were working overtime. They'd been detaining several people a day for the last two weeks in his local police station alone, he said. He showed *The Times* images of arrest orders on the police force's platform and said they received new targets every two to three hours, usually people who had been protesting or supporting protests online.

The police were entering these Mongols' homes and making them sign pledges to not speak against the bilingual program anymore, the source said. If they did not comply, they were detained, he said, and would become "key individuals," marked in China's police databases as threats to security requiring targeted surveillance and control.

"It's terrifying," he said. Those arrested included elderly people, pregnant women and middle school students, he said, and those marked as key individuals would be put under lifelong surveillance.

The policeman said that he had refused to participate in the crackdown and that many other Mongol police who had school-age children had refused to come to work at all.

"I'm Mongol. I won't arrest Mongols," he said, adding that there was no legal basis to arrest people who were fighting for their mother tongue. "I want to live by my principles."

On Wednesday, several public security bureaus in eastern Inner Mongolia published wanted lists with names and head shots of people accused of "picking quarrels and provoking troubles," a nebulous charge often used against dissidents, lawyers and activists in China that comes with a maximum jail sentence of five years — or 10 years for multiple offenses.

The head shots appeared to be zoomed-in surveillance camera images of people participating in protests, many of them standing on the street or raising cellphone lights in the air. Some of the wanted lists specified that the "suspects" had been involved in incidents near schools.

The language program has stirred anger and defiance because many Mongols see it as the final step in a decades-long attempt at cultural erasure, said Enghebatu Togocho, director of the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center. There are roughly 6 million Mongols in China, according to the latest census taken in 2010, almost double the number of Mongols in Mongolia. But within Inner Mongolia, Mongols have become a minority within their own region, constituting just about 18% of the population.

"Mongolians feel that language, the last stronghold of their national identity, is about to be wiped out by this new policy," said Togocho. "That's why Mongolians feel urgency: If we lose this, we lose everything. We cease to exist."

Mongols have often been seen as a "model minority," coexisting relatively peacefully with Han Chinese despite the killings of at least 22,000 Mongols during the 1960s Cultural Revolution and mass displacement in a controversial "eco-migration" program through the 2000s, under which Mongol herders were moved into urban areas in the name of protecting the grasslands.

Mining projects run mostly by Han Chinese often took over former grazing areas. Many rural schools that taught in Mongolian were left empty and shut down in the process.

Today, the number of Inner Mongolians attending school in Mongolian has declined from nearly 60% in 1990 to just over 30%, according to an article by University of Pennsylvania Mongolia expert Christopher Atwood.

Yet Mongolian-language education had been allowed a degree of freedom in comparison with the more restive minority regions of Xinjiang and Tibet, where programs replacing Kazakh-, Uighur- and Tibetan-language education with Mandarin have been in place since

the early 2000s.

That changed with Xi, under whom China launched a “second generation” approach to ethnic minorities in recent years. It rejects the old Soviet-based system, which allowed relative autonomy and preservation of language and culture in designated regions, in favor of a new “melting pot” approach that emphasizes assimilation into Han Chinese culture.

The stated purpose of these policies is to strengthen patriotism and loyalty to the nation and the Communist Party. But they are often implemented through force and intimidation.

A Times reporter who visited the Mongol school in Hohhot was surrounded by plainclothes men who put her into a police car. They took her to the back building of a police station, where she was interrogated and separated from her belongings despite identifying herself as an accredited journalist. She was not allowed to call the U.S. Embassy; one officer grabbed her throat with both hands and pushed her into a cell.

The reporter was detained for more than four hours. She was then forced to leave the region, with three government officials and a policeman accompanying her to a train and standing at the window until the train left for Beijing.

The police source who spoke with The Times said he feared that much worse would happen to the Mongols who are resisting the language changes — including himself. He knew about similar measures taken in Tibet and Xinjiang in recent years and did not expect the Chinese government to show mercy to Inner Mongolia.

“There are many people within the system who are against what’s happening, but we are trapped,” he said. “We need the world’s attention.”

The Times also visited two Mandarin-language elementary schools on Tuesday morning. Large crowds of chattering parents, grandparents, babysitters and tutors waited at the school gates to pick up their children during the lunch break. The students marched out of their classrooms in neat columns, chanting “One, two, one, two, one,” then ran laughing into stationery shops across the street or followed babysitters and relatives to attend lunch-time tutoring programs.

Several Han Chinese parents said that they hadn’t heard about a bilingual program in the Mongol schools and that there was no Mongolian-language tutoring. “Why would we need that? We’re all Chinese,” said one woman, who did not give her name.

At the Mongol school, security forces outnumbered parents, who paused to watch their children go past the police, then walked away in silence.



**A SHOP** near Hohhot’s university district sells T-shirts with popular Mongolian symbols and band names, and Mongolian-language books.



Photographs by ALICE SU Los Angeles Times

**LEFT:** The Tiejia mosque in Linxia, Gansu province, China, in 2016. Right: The same mosque on Nov. 13, 2020, after authorities demolished the mosque and minarets.

## A FAITH FADES IN CHINA

In Gansu province, Muslim minorities feel push to shift their devotion to the Communist Party

By Alice Su

**L**INXIA, CHINA — The morning ritual began as dozens of men in traditional white skullcaps filed quietly into mosques, nodding to one another in the chill of an autumn twilight.

But there was no call to prayer. Another less spiritual message flashed silently in red characters on a screen across from one of the mosques: “STRENGTHEN ETHNIC UNITY, MAINTAIN SOCIAL STABILITY.” Surveillance cameras swiveled at the sign’s two sides. The men passed by them to praise God.

The rising sun revealed that the domes and minarets on the city’s three grand mosques, each home to a different Islamic sect of the Hui people, a Chinese Muslim minority, had been snapped apart and scooped away. Bamboo scaffolding had been put up for renovations that would further strip the mosques of their identities.

Here in the minority heartland of northwestern China’s Gansu province, a social engineering initiative that offers improved livelihoods while demanding a shift from religious to political devotion is underway. It lies at the intersection of two nationwide campaigns:



**THE LAOHUA MOSQUE** in Linxia now has a Chinese-style roof, which is meant to promote a more “Sinicized” version of Islam.

the “Sinicization of religion” to erase foreign influence and bring religion under state control, and the eradication of poverty through mass resettlement, job training and sending cadres into villages to teach the Communist Party’s will.

The campaigns are signature designs of Chinese leader Xi Jinping. They are reshaping a land of red mountains and minarets, filled with minority languages and faiths born of ancient mingling on the Silk Road. Their aim is to mold a future patterned after Han-majority China, with urban jobs, material dreams and strengthened loyalties to the party and its leader.

Three men walking out of mosques in Linxia, a city once nicknamed “Little Mecca” for its many Islamic communities, separately confirmed that the religious buildings had been partially demolished while many people remained indoors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The domes and minarets built in “Arab” or “Saudi” style were to be replaced with Chinese-style roofs meant to promote a more “Sinicized” version of Islam.

“It just happened all of a sudden,” said Ma Hassan, 36, a local hotel businessman. “They came up with this policy of de-Saudi-ification, de-Arabization, and that was it. We accepted it — how could we not? The government decided.”

“They’re controlling us,” said Ma Zhongxian, 55, a local Hui businessman who had attended morning prayers, “but mostly the next generation will be affected. They will probably lose their faith, or it will be diluted.”

Adults had relative freedom to worship, he said, but Communist Party cadres, following new state guidelines, sat outside the mosques to ensure no minors entered for Friday prayers. Summer religion and Arabic schools once attended by many Hui children were banned. The call to prayer was forbidden as a “public nuisance,” Ma said, despite Muslims making up 60% of Linxia’s population.

A Times reporter visited the damaged mosques during a government-organized tour of Gansu to showcase poverty alleviation efforts. The mosques were not part of the itinerary. But a Linxia propaganda official confirmed that they had received orders from the central government to combat “Arab-ization, Saudi-ization and pan-Islamification” in Gansu, and to restrict mosque-building and participation in the hajj, an annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca.



**A SCREEN** across the street from a mosque in Linxia, Gansu province, reads: “Strengthen ethnic unity, maintain social stability.”

“We are worried about foreign infiltration and religious extremism. That’s a global phenomenon,” said the official, who asked not to be named because he was not supposed to discuss the new religious controls. No extremist attacks or activity had happened in Linxia, he said. But the policy was preemptive and came from Beijing.

Officials’ approach to Gansu appears more relaxed than in neighboring Xinjiang, where Uighur minority Muslims have been detained en masse for forced “reeducation,” then moved to prisons or shipped to factories for offenses including growing beards, having family members abroad or installing WhatsApp on their phones. Many holy sites there have been razed rather than refurbished with “Chinese” trappings.

In a “poverty alleviation factory” on the outskirts of Linxia, rows of women — some wearing hijabs, all in uniforms and face masks — sewed shoe interiors together and packed them in boxes. An official spoke proudly of how the factory had “transformed people’s thinking” and provided income to conservative housewives who traditionally rarely left their homes.

One of the Hui factory workers, Mafutumai, 30, said her thoughts had been “transformed.” She had stopped attending school after age 13 and married at 18. She had done only housework for the last 15 years. “Religious thinking” taught her that women should stay home, but now she was making roughly \$380 a month, which she liked.

At the same time, she said she was proud to fast during Ramadan and wear her hijab at the factory. If the bosses asked her to remove it, she would resist. “I’m Hui and that’s who I am,” she said. “I wear hijab and that’s what I do.”

The factory manager, Song Wenkai, 39, hailed from Xiamen, a wealthy coastal city in



**HUI MINORITY** women sew shoe interiors together at a “poverty alleviation factory” on the outskirts of Linxia.

southern China where his company had been manufacturing shoes for 20 years. Xiamen and Linxia were part of a government initiative linking eastern and western cities and subsidizing factories to open branches in poor parts of China like Gansu, he said.

The factory in Linxia paid no rent or electricity fees but was not turning a profit. The workers were less efficient than Xiamen's workers, but he paid them half the salary and did not provide social benefits. Rising wages and stricter enforcement of labor laws in eastern China had already pushed many factories to move to Southeast Asia in recent years. It made sense for Song's company to move to minority regions in western China instead; he said he could keep the supply chain domestic, use cheaper labor and fulfill a "political duty."

"It will get better in the long term," Song said. "The labor is plentiful and the government is helping."

Such government help — and thought reform — is also reaching into villages such as Bulengou, part of the Dongxiang region, home to a Muslim minority of just over 600,000 people. Descended from Mongols who intermarried with Central Asians, Dongxiang people are one of the poorest groups in China, with historically low literacy rates and difficulty farming and herding sheep in mountain villages.

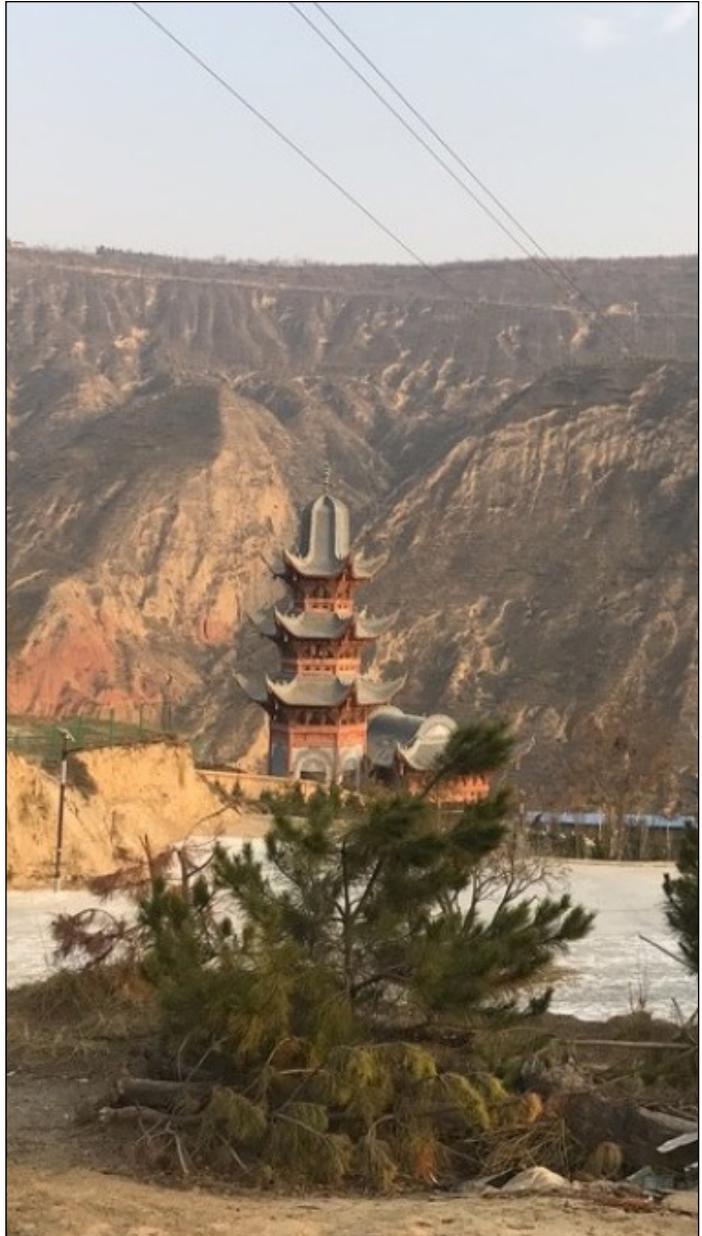
They speak a Mongolic tongue interspersed with Mandarin, Persian, Arabic and Turkic words, a testament to the people who once passed through this remote pocket of Gansu.

On the road approaching Bulengou, two icons towered over the village: a gongbei, an old Islamic-Chinese religious structure in rusty shades of red and blue, and a bright red billboard quoting Xi Jinping. The gongbei was enclosed behind a padlocked gate, with a sign forbidding photos. The Xi billboard welcomed visitors to a museum honoring Xi's visit to the village in 2013, with images and video of grateful Muslims flocking to see the party leader.

Inside, a Dongxiang man posed with running water from a faucet printed with the slogan: "Drink water while thinking of the General Secretary/Give thanks to the Communist Party forever." State media reporters crowded around, snapping photos as a cadre told the man how to position his hands.

Every villager had been given an identical faucet as part of the poverty alleviation drive, which had also brought smooth roads, relocations to new homes and job training. The improvements transformed the village — while cadres transformed villagers' thoughts.

Yang Cheng, a cadre from Xiamen who'd been sent from state-owned oil and gas com-



**AN OLD ISLAMIC-CHINESE** tower stands over Bulengou, a village in the Dongxiang region, which is home to a Muslim minority of just over 600,000 people.



**INSIDE A VILLAGE** museum honoring Xi Jinping’s visit to Bulengou in 2013, a Dongxiang man washes his hands in running water as state media reporters take photos on Nov. 12, 2020.

pany Sinopec to work in Bulengou since January 2019, explained that his primary job was grass-roots party-building. He educated the villagers on party policies and trained new, younger party members who would renounce their religion when they joined, in accordance with party rules. So far there were 19 party members out of 315 villagers, he said.

“They have this problem because they grew up in this environment. But once you’re absorbed in the party, you give that up to follow party rules. You become a leader,” he said.

In recent years, local schools had enforced strict Mandarin teaching and forbade students to participate in religious activities like fasting during Ramadan, he said: “The children have no religious education now.” Inside one of the new Dongxiang homes, a woman named Maruru, 67, spoke Dongxiang to her 3-year-old grandson, Hassan. His older siblings all switched to Mandarin once they started school. They would probably forget Dongxiang altogether before long, she said.

But Maruru was more worried about money. She has two older grandchildren in school in Linxia and Lanzhou who needed nearly \$100 a week for living expenses. Her daughter-in-law was making \$9 a day embroidering in a poverty alleviation project. Her son was a migrant worker earning about \$27 a day. It wasn’t enough, she said.

Her husband, Mawumaile, 72, agreed. “We don’t have any culture. We just want to have enough to eat,” he said. He had grown up in the mountains herding sheep and never attended school. All he wanted now was for his grandchildren to have an education and a future. A party cadre sat in the room, listening and nodding as he spoke.

But when Mawumaile was asked about the gongbei, he sat up and puffed out his chest.



**EVERY BULENGOU** villager was given identical faucets with the slogan: “Drink water while thinking of the General Secretary/Give thanks to the Communist Party forever.”

“That tower has been here for a thousand years! It was brought by our Arab ancestors. It is a sign of our people,” he said as the cadre pursed his lips.

Hints of that pride in heritage remain even among some government workers. On a car ride with a Times reporter through the mountains around Bulengou, on a road so new there were no lights, Ma Fei, 30, a Dongxiang employee of the local propaganda department, spoke of how he taught Dongxiang to his son at home. “This language will be lost very soon,” he said.

Growing up, he remembered drinking melted snow and rainwater in his village home. The changes in recent years were good, he said, but had brought new questions about how to live — and whether some things from their previous lives should be preserved.

“In the past our biggest worry was whether we had enough potatoes. Now I can make money and change my own life,” he said. With the choices of modern, urban life flooding toward the region, he was glad to still have Islam as a guide. Some people associated religion with terrorism and extremism, he said, but they were wrong.

“Religion is not dangerous at all, especially among our people,” he said. “It cannot hurt our country’s interests.”

At a vocational school for Dongxiang students, another Xi quote was printed on the walls: “All happiness comes through struggle!” His message seemed to have convinced the dozens of Dongxiang youth who were receiving training to become beef noodle chefs or makeup artists. A row of teenagers stood in chef’s hats, aprons and face masks, practicing flipping their woks. Most had not made good enough grades to attend high school. Several of them said they didn’t speak Dongxiang.

Their ancestral language was not relevant to their dreams, they said, which were to get jobs in big cities, make something of themselves and send money back home. One of the teens, Ma Guodong, 18, posted selfies in his chef’s hat and a video of him cooking on WeChat with motivational quotes: “As long as you work hard enough, the sun will shine through thick clouds into your life” and “Failure is not as bad as not trying. Everyone has a process of striving...”

While language and religion are fading from the newly “Sinicized” generation, the older faithful have endured in quiet. Back in Linxia, Ma Zhongxian, the businessman, said he had visited Xinjiang last year and seen stricter restrictions on religious dress and entrance to mosques, and a far stronger security state.

“We are not as bad as them yet,” he said, though he suspected Gansu could soon go in the same direction. Local officials were already saying they needed to Sinicize Muslims for “security reasons.”

“Hui, Dongxiang, everyone is the same. They’re controlling us, not just in Linxia, but in the whole country,” he said. “Of course I am afraid, but what can I do? This is the nation’s trajectory.”

All he could do was to keep his own faith. He would walk past the minaret stumps at noon and pray again.



**MAWUMAILE AND MARURU**, a Dongxiang couple in Bulengou village, pose with their daughter-in-law and two grandchildren.



Hulton Archive

**PEOPLE MARCH** carrying a large poster of Chairman Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution in China in 1968.

# CHINA'S TEACHING ELITE ARE ITS LATEST TARGETS

By Alice Su

**B**EIJING — The professor was under surveillance. Cameras taped her every lecture. She couldn't publish or give talks outside the university. She knew she had to be careful when she taught on one of China's most sensitive and dangerous topics: the Cultural Revolution.

To preempt accusations of straying beyond academia, all discussion was based on archives, books and articles. Classes were kept small; heavy reading lists filtered out potential student-informants. She made seating charts with photos, making sure no stranger could wander in unnoticed.

Despite such scrutiny, Sun Peidong felt lucky to be teaching in Shanghai's prestigious



Guo Yuhua

**GUO YUHUA** and Xu Zhangrun at Tsinghua University on April 28, 2019, after Xu was suspended from teaching.

Fudan University, the only school left in China offering truthful courses on the repressive Cultural Revolution of half a century ago. She loved watching her students question conventional narratives, find new ways of understanding their nation's history and draw connections with their own families' traumas.

Then the students turned her in.

Sun is among a growing number of university professors who have been targeted and punished for "improper speech" in recent years, part of a Chinese Communist Party drive to tighten ideological control.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the party banned discussion in 2013 of "Western concepts" such as universal values, a free press, civil society and the party's historical errors. In 2018, teachers from kindergarten through university were ordered to adhere to "Xi Jinping thought" and defend the party.

Those guidelines have hardened during a nationalist surge around the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to public shaming of intellectuals that remind many of the Mao Zedong era.

Professors have been betrayed by their own students or attacked online, then formally punished: In February, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences fired Zhou Peiyi, a visiting lecturer from Hong Kong, after she criticized China's coronavirus response on social media.

This month, Hubei University fired literature professor Liang Yanping and revoked her party membership for publishing "incorrect speech" on social media related to Japan and Hong Kong. At least two other professors in Hainan and Harbin are under investigation for similar reasons.

Liang had been harangued online for supporting Wuhan novelist Fang Fang, whose coronavirus lockdown diary — at first embraced as an honest depiction of people's suffering — became a target of nationalist anger once it was published in English.

Critics accuse Fang Fang of "handing a knife" to Western countries to smear China. They have sent her death threats and condemned her supporters, digging through their old social media posts to find anything that deviates from the party line.

For Fang Fang, 65, whose real name is Wang Fang, the crackdown is a continuation of the ideology that drove China's Cultural Revolution — a period of radical violence under Mao's

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leadership, when youth militias roamed the nation denouncing and often killing intellectuals, authority figures and anyone labeled a “class enemy.” It is also, she noted, a failure to confront the damage that legacy did.

Chinese people have lived through generations of revolution, war, famine, massacre and other traumas since 1949. The coronavirus is the latest. Yet they have never been allowed to confront their own history or speak freely of it to their children.

The result is a society of impaired memory, Wang said in an email to *The Times*, one that repeats cycles of devastation and forgetting without addressing their deeper causes and consequences.

“People don’t know what forms the society they live in can take,” Wang said. “This hollowing and hiding of history affects countless people’s worldviews and most basic value judgments.”

When authorities lied to residents about the scope of the coronavirus and locked down the city of Wuhan in January without sufficient medical care, thousands died during the outbreak. Such deception and abandonment, Wang thought, would spark a public cry for accountability.

“My judgment was wrong,” she said. “The epidemic has not ended, yet all I see everywhere is praise. Our education teaches many of us only to forget, even if our bodies are still wounded. They sing praises while covering their scars.”

These days, as it has been for decades, it is safest to be circumspect and cautious. To survive as a Chinese teacher or professor requires constant self-censorship and compromise, especially in the humanities, as university propaganda departments pressure instructors to promote party ideology.

Resistance comes at a cost, said Tsinghua University sociologist Guo Yuhua. In 2019, her colleague Xu Zhangrun, a law professor, was interrogated and suspended from teaching after publishing a series of essays critical of President Xi, regarded by many intellectuals as a tyrannical autocrat who is steering China backward.

After writing another critique of Xi’s handling of the coronavirus this year, Xu was placed under house arrest and cut off from the internet, though Guo said he has now been released.

Guo, 64, was one of the only Tsinghua scholars who spoke in Xu’s defense. She has also been reprimanded by the university’s party officials and blocked from social media. She struggles to get copies of her own books, only published in Hong Kong and repeatedly confiscated at customs. Before meeting a *Times* reporter for an interview, she was called and warned not to speak with foreign media.

“I am afraid,” she said. Colleagues and friends had told her to stop speaking. You’ll only hurt yourself, they said. But she didn’t want to give in.

“All people face risk,” Guo said. “If we think, ‘I’ll just give up one step,’ then everyone gives up a step, then another — and in the end we have no space at all. The ceiling presses straight to the floor.”

Deep-rooted pragmatism runs through Chinese society, Guo said, the product of enduring thousands of years of authoritarianism.

She saw it in her fieldwork, collecting oral histories from Chinese farmers who had been forbidden to flee their villages amid the Great Leap Forward, one of the worst man-made famines in history.

Those who survived starvation were thrown into the purges and upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. When China finally began to open, allowing people like Guo to attend university, hundreds of millions of rural people remained locked in inferior status because of their birthplace.

Even now, 40 years after reform began, China’s social structure does not recognize people as equal citizens. It also places no bounds on the Communist Party’s power. Those dynamics create China’s cycle of crises, Guo said. But with no dissent tolerated and little space for historical reflection, few would think of demanding change.

“Chinese commoners are truly the best commoners in the world. They suffer, they bear with it, they endure,” Guo said. “They put life above dignity. They say, ‘As long as I’m alive, it’s fine.’”

As a sociologist, Guo said, her job was to tell the truth — not to project “positive energy,” as the propaganda department expected, but to be like a doctor, finding the symptoms of a society’s illness and diagnosing its cause.

“If you won’t even let us tell the truth and we just follow you, singing songs and speaking lies, then we are not scholars, we are not academics, this is not sociology,” she said. “What’s the point?”

Sun, the Fudan historian, entered academia at a more open time. She was invited to join Fudan’s history department in 2013 by its party secretary, himself a scholar of the Cultural Revolution. There were a few “golden years,” she said, when she freely held workshops, conferences and discussions with Western scholars, and guided her students, among the smartest youths in China.

Things began to change in 2015. Several of her articles about the Cultural Revolution were rejected by academic journals. Secret police questioned her about her research and Western connections. She left the country for two years, completing fellowships at Harvard and Stanford.

When she returned in September 2018, a new party secretary was in charge. Sun was blocked from giving public lectures and was asked to change the name and content of her course. She refused.

Then, in April 2019, students posted papers on her office door — printouts of her social media posts and accusations that she was supporting a female student to subvert state power.

They were reminiscent of “big character posters,” handwritten political denunciations that Mao had encouraged students to use as a “weapon” during the Cultural Revolution. Students plastered campuses with vitriolic diatribes against their teachers, often a prelude to insulting them on public stages, then beating them to death. Sun was saddened to be a target of similar tactics.

“That was very hurtful,” Sun said. “Because I really love teaching. I really care for my students.”

The students also reported her to her department, the university president and university-level party secretary. They attacked her personally online. Anonymous users joined in,



Sovfoto / Universal Images Group via Getty Images  
**“BIG CHARACTER POSTERS”** are put up by peasants and soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army in China, circa 1970.

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cursing her as a traitor and threatening her family in private messages. The department's party secretary told Sun she had brought it on herself.

Before traveling to Hong Kong for an academic conference in July 2019, Sun was forced to sign an agreement vowing not to take photos, talk to locals about the ongoing protests or post anything about them online.

Then in December, a rare protest flared at Fudan: The university had changed the school charter, removing "freedom of thought" and inserting paragraphs about loyalty to the Communist Party. A student flash mob gathered in the cafeteria and sang Fudan's school song, which praises those terms that were removed.

Sun was not involved in the protest, but she discussed it with several Western newspapers. The students protesting in the cafeteria, she said, reflected three types of people in Chinese society: those who resisted by singing out, those who watched and filmed them but said nothing, and those who lowered their heads and ate, as if oblivious to what was going on.

"If people want to come to consciousness, to wake up and be alive, to know what kind of society they live in or want for their kids, they know what to do. If not, they just keep quiet," she told *The Times*. "You cannot wake a people who are pretending to be sleeping."

The department party secretary ordered Sun to write a personal statement pledging that she'd stop speaking to foreign media. It threatened to block her from traveling abroad if she didn't comply.

Neither Fudan University, Tsinghua University nor the Ministry of Education responded to requests for comment.

This year, Sun quit her job and left China. There is no free space left, she said.

Only two other history professors were teaching the Cultural Revolution at Fudan. One is retiring this year, and the other has been pressured into changing what he teaches.

"That's what the party wants," Sun said: either praise or silence.



ADRIÀ FRUITÓS Los Angeles Times

**AN ILLUSTRATION** of Xi Jinping.

# THE RISE OF EMPEROR XI

Prosperity, power and political devotion merge.

By Alice Su

**Y**ANAN, CHINA — Stars showered from the ceiling as actors suspended by ropes ran through the air. An unseen man’s voice boomed through the theater: “I have followed this red flag, walking thousands of kilometers with the faith of a Communist Party member in my heart!”

Here in the hallowed ground of northern Shaanxi province, the Chinese Communist Party’s founding myths are on full display. A musical performed twice daily portrays revolutionaries rescuing China from foreign invasion and corruption: Conniving generals coerce Shanghai women dressed like flappers to dance. Communist students are hanged. Trapeze artists in military fatigues flip upside down amid flurries of fake snow.

It is rousing agitprop underscoring a slogan that has saturated the nation in recent years: “*Buwang chuxin, laoji shiming*” — “Don’t forget our original intentions; hold tightly to the mission.”

That mission’s changing parameters are key to understanding Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Since coming into power in 2012, Xi has often drawn comparisons to Mao Zedong, the par-



Photographs by ALICE SU Los Angeles Times

**ACTORS RUN** through the air, eager to join the Communist Party, in a propaganda musical in Yanan.

ty's and People's Republic of China's founder, a demigod who ravaged the nation in pursuit of communist ideals that led to widespread starvation and arbitrary killing, yet commanded adoration from the masses.

No Chinese leader since has held as much authority — until Xi. But he is not Mao 2.0. A disciplinarian, not a revolutionary, Xi is driven by a need for control. He is a legalist in the tradition of Han Feizi, the philosopher who taught China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, that people are fickle and selfish and must be kept in line through law and punishment. An ethnic nationalist, Xi holds a vision of Chinese revival that draws on allusions to past empires. He speaks in Marxist terms of class struggle and uses Maoist tactics such as self-criticism and rectification, but his brand of communism also promotes Confucius and e-commerce.

The Chinese president sees himself as a savior to lead the country into a “new era” of greatness propelled by rising prosperity and political devotion. Whether his vision matches reality is another question.

The stakes of achieving Xi's grand plan are high. His rule has led to sweeping crackdowns on corruption and political dissent at home and an increasingly assertive foreign policy, including provocative naval exercises in the South China Sea and Beijing's tense relations with Washington over trade, spying, technology and repression of pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong.

To appreciate Xi's grip on the country, one need only look at the coronavirus — China stumbled early with the Wuhan outbreak, but quickly recovered through strict lockdowns, contact tracing and mass testing. It has virtually stemmed the disease while racing to become the first nation with a publicly available vaccine. China's economy grew nearly 5% in the third quarter while the United States and Europe continued to struggle with COVID-19. Xi and the party point to such signs as proof of the Chinese system's superiority.

Meanwhile, far from party headquarters in Beijing, an origin story is tended in a village of yellow hills.

Two hours away from the theater in Yanan, tourists in matching red scarves visited a set of caves in Liangjiahe, where Xi spent seven years during the Cultural Revolution. He was one of millions of city youths “sent down” to work in rural areas in the 1960s, officially to



**TEACHERS FROM** Guangzhou visited the Xi caves of Liangjiahe. They were all receiving required training as supervisors of the Young Pioneers, a Communist Party youth organization, and would then pass on the “red spirit” they’d acquired here to their students, one of the teachers said.

“learn from the peasants” but also to reduce urban unemployment and quiet the violence of radical student groups.

“Here is where the chairman ate coarse grain buns with the farmers,” a guide said as a group of teachers from Guangzhou peered inside one of the caves. Newspaper cutouts with headlines about Mao and a photo of teenage Xi, slightly smiling into the distance, hung above rolled-up blankets and a straw mat on a raised mud platform. A bag of anti-flea powder sat prominently displayed on the window ledge, a testament to the fleabites young Xi endured.

A small museum weaves Xi’s narrative with that of the Communist Party’s benevolence, explaining that Xi read stories and dug wells for the villagers as a teenager, then charting the village’s recent rise in average income per person — from \$25 a year in 1984 to \$3,218 a year in 2019.

When Xi speaks about his coming of age, he points to Liangjiahe. “Northern Shaanxi gave me a belief. You could say it set the path for the rest of my life,” Xi said in a 2004 interview with the People’s Daily.

He started out lazy and weak in the village, but by the end of seven years, he had experienced hard labor and developed a taste for the pickled vegetables of peasants. It is a folklore reminiscent of Mao’s claims of seeking liberation for the oppressed underclass. But whereas Mao incited grass-roots movements and armed struggle, Xi’s approach to power eschews mass mobilization.

“You see this huge emphasis on order and discipline. That’s seemingly a very strong reaction against the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and Mao’s chaotic approach,” said Ryan Mitchell, a professor of law at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Under Mao, the legal system was “decimated,” he said. “Xi is instead trying to institutionalize things, including his own power.”

The seeds of Xi’s resolve and ruling style are in his upbringing. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, his father, Xi Zhongxun, a founding revolutionary who joined the party while in jail at age 14 for trying to poison his “reactionary” schoolteacher, had already fallen into disgrace.

Xi Zhongxun lived through hellish periods of internal party factionalism. He was purged multiple times — removed from power, incarcerated, even threatened with being buried alive — for his association with individuals and “gangs” who were deemed disloyal. Some of his mentors and associates died by suicide. Yet he remained devoted, even proud of his suffering at the party’s hands.

“It’s hard to think of someone who’d more fanatically put party interests above his own interest,” said Joseph Torigian, a professor of history and politics at American University who is writing a biography of Xi Zhongxun. “A lot of that generation

took pride in how much they were able to suffer without losing faith in the party. They often wrote about it as a sort of forging process.”

At home, Xi Zhongxun — who went from vice premier at one point to working at a tractor factory when he was purged — was a “brutal disciplinarian” who struggled with depression, Torigian said, according to memoirs, unpublished diaries and interviews with friends of the family. When Xi Jinping was a child, he probably saw his father sometimes crying, screaming and hitting people, sitting in a room with all the lights off, and lashing out at his wife.

The family’s humiliation and persecution led one of Xi’s stepsisters to kill herself. Xi Jinping was locked up several times because of his father’s position and had to denounce him in public, he said in a 1992 interview with the Washington Post: “ ‘Even if you don’t understand, you are forced to understand,’ he said with a trace of bitterness. ‘It makes you mature earlier.’”

At the same time, Xi’s peers, other “princeling” children of high-ranking Chinese Communist Party leaders whose parents hadn’t been purged, were rampaging through Beijing as Red Guards, given power to torture and often kill teachers, intellectuals and authority figures. They believed they were bringing about utopia. Xi was not allowed to join them, even as he saw himself as a true party disciple.

Some scholars suggest that the shame of that period pushed Xi not to question or renounce the extremities of Mao’s leadership, but to prove himself worthy to lead.

“He sees himself as the legitimate successor of the CCP red dynasty by blood,” said Yinghong Cheng, a professor of history at Delaware State University. Many princelings of Xi’s generation regard state power as their “family inheritance,” Cheng said. “They are entitled to it, must hold it firm, and losing it means losing everything.”

Most of Xi’s generation were idealists when they were young, said a prominent Chinese historian who also spent years as a “sent-down youth” and asked not to use his name for protection. But for him and many liberal intellectuals, returning to university in 1977, after Mao died and the Cultural Revolution ended, sparked a painstaking reassessment.

“Everything I’d built on — Marx, Lenin, Mao — they were all wrong. I needed to adjust from the roots, to spit out that wolf’s milk we had all drunk,” the historian said. “Inch by inch, you rebuild your worldview. It takes decades to become cleareyed, to say, ‘Where did we go wrong? What is China? Who are we?’”

Xi did not go through that process, the historian said. He left Liangjiahe for Tsinghua University in 1975 as a “worker-peasant-soldier” student, one of the children with “red” class backgrounds who were nominated to return to school during the Cultural Revolution



**POSTERS OF** Mao Zedong hang in one of the caves where Xi Jinping once slept in Liangjiahe, Shaanxi province.



**A PHOTO** from 1975 shows Xi Jinping sitting in the center of the front row, surrounded by villagers in Liangjiahe before he went to university as a “worker-peasant-soldier” student.

by their work teams. Chosen for their good performance in Mao’s system, many such students “strengthened their own red identity” rather than deconstructing it, the historian said.

After his father was rehabilitated in 1978, Xi Jinping worked as a party official in several coastal provinces. It was there he saw firsthand how market reforms brought wealth and rising living standards — but also an explosion of corruption. The experience would stay with him. In 2012, shortly after Xi came to power, he went on a “southern tour” to Shenzhen, retracing the footsteps of Deng Xiaoping, who in the 1970s and ’80s oversaw China’s economic opening.



**A POSTER** of Mao and old newspapers hang on the wall in one of the caves where Xi once slept as a teenager in Liangjiahe.

But Xi’s vision of reform was different. In his view, China’s Communist Party was in crisis: Inequality and corruption were rampant and people had abandoned their ideals. The nation risked repeating the fate of the Soviet Union, he said in a 2012 speech, where “no one was man enough” to assert ideological control and resist “Western ideas” such as democracy, separation of powers or rule of law. China needed a strong “man” to reassert the party’s power and inspire the masses.

Since 2012, after a steady rise through the party from being a secretary in the Central Military Commission to a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and then its paramount leader, Xi has been that man. He targeted corruption, taking on officials as powerful as Zhou Yongkang, the former head of China’s security apparatus.

He restructured the military, media and legal-disciplinary institutions to assert stronger party control. He did away with term limits — in effect making himself leader for life — and enshrined “Xi Jinping Thought” in the Constitution, rendering himself indivisible

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from a party that permeates every aspect of Chinese society.

Xi's ambitions abroad have been just as grand. He has expanded China's global power through multibillion-dollar development projects such as the Belt and Road initiative and by gaining more influence in institutions like the United Nations. He has capitalized on a United States that has turned isolationist under President Trump, dispatching China's corporations, diplomats and spies everywhere from Nairobi, Kenya, to Brussels in what is becoming a new world order.

Xi often says that this era is one of "great change unseen in a hundred years," namely that the world's top superpower is in decline, and that this is China's moment to rise. "Systemic advantages are a nation's greatest advantages, and systemic competition is the most fundamental competition between nations," Xi was recently quoted saying in the People's Daily.

That determination to prove the Chinese system superior has driven impressive moves toward combating poverty and pollution, making this nation of 1.4 billion people a dominant force in high-tech industries and allowing it to contain the coronavirus outbreak — even as much of the world blames China for allowing the disease to spread.

But Xi has also stifled all perceived threats to social "stability": not only dissidents, but also human rights lawyers, labor activists, poets, feminists and more. He has launched "Sinicization" programs targeting religious and ethnic minorities, including the mass incarceration of Uighurs and other Muslims. He has imposed a new national security law that is smothering the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. He has tightened control over schools from kindergarten through university, reinforcing "patriotic education" with Xi Jinping Thought as a guiding ideology.

In July, he announced a new "education and rectification" campaign to discipline China's political and legal systems, including police officers, judges and members of the secretive Ministry of State Security. The campaign slogans call for "turning the knife inward" to "scrape poison off the bone," meaning to find, punish and reform — or purge — any potentially disloyal individuals.

Officials leading the campaign call it a renewed version of the rectification drive Mao launched at the party base of Yanan in the 1940s, where the chairman used group indoctrination, self-criticism, forced confession and "struggle" sessions to eliminate perceived internal rivals.

It is unusual that Xi "does not perceive his power to be completely consolidated, even eight years in," said Sheena Greitens, a professor of public affairs who studies Chinese approaches to security at the University of Texas at Austin. Xi may be launching this campaign to prepare for 2022, when he will transition into an unprecedented third term, she said.

But a political system prone to crackdowns can turn suspicious and brittle, with everyone afraid to point out problems or admit mistakes. It is what allowed the initial cover-up of a virus spreading in Wuhan last winter, at the cost of thousands of civilian deaths. When things go wrong, however, Xi has used a classic technique: punishing local officials while keeping the emperor free of blame.

Perhaps the trickiest part of his reign is Xi's attempts to combine market reforms with state leadership. China's economy — despite its rebounding from the coronavirus — has slowed dramatically under Xi, in part because the private sector has been spooked by his talk of communist revival. The U.S.-China trade war, a drive for "decoupling" the two economies and the pandemic's impact have also strengthened Xi's support for state-owned enterprises, which he calls the core of China's economy despite their inefficiencies.

He has made high-profile speeches reassuring China's private companies, such as tech giants Huawei and Alibaba, that they are crucial to the China dream — but also demanded that they "listen to the party, walk with the party," and strengthen internal party committees' role in the companies' decision-making.

Xi's militant nationalism has also provoked backlash. The Chinese military has carried

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out aggressive maneuvers in the South China Sea and rattled Taiwan by sending fighter planes into its airspace. Chinese troops have had deadly clashes in recent months with Indian soldiers along a disputed border. Xi's reorganized security forces have increased arbitrary detention of foreigners including citizens of the U.S., Canada, Australia, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, Belize, Turkey and Kazakhstan.

A recent Pew Research Center survey found that unfavorable views of China have reached historical highs in 14 advanced world economies, with a median of 78% of respondents saying they have "no confidence" in Xi's handling of world affairs — though the ratings on Trump are even worse.

Ironically, a popular nickname for Xi on the Chinese internet is the "accelerator in chief," meaning that his aggressive approach to "stability" has caused more domestic and international conflict and is speeding his government toward self-demise. Criticism has risen even from fellow princelings: Cai Xia, the granddaughter of a revolutionary leader who taught at the central party school for four decades, was recorded calling Xi a "mafia boss" this year.

"He has turned 90 million party members into slaves, tools to be used for his personal advantage," Cai said.

Ren Zhiqiang, a real estate tycoon who fell from the red elite, called Xi "a clown stripped naked" in a critique of Xi's COVID-19 response this year. "The reality shown by this epidemic is that the party defends its own interests, the government officials defend their own interests, and the monarch only defends the status and interests of the core," Ren said.

Ren and Cai have been expelled from the party. Cai is now in the United States. Ren has been sentenced to prison for 18 years.

The rising ire of elites and foreign powers is, in Xi's view, a necessary part of China's struggle on its socialist path. The intellectuals may be alarmed, but not the masses. A recent Harvard Kennedy School study of Chinese public opinion from 2003 to 2016 found that satisfaction with the government had risen, especially among the rural poor in inland regions, who received more targeted social assistance during the survey years.

"This fits exactly with his self-understanding: 'I'm here for the people, and that's why I'm against you capitalists, corrupt elites and intellectuals,'" the historian said. "He thinks he is saving this party."

Whether the people see Xi that way, however, is harder to tell. In Liangjiahe, two women carrying umbrellas followed a Times reporter everywhere she went. When two villagers, a man in his 60s and a woman surnamed Ma selling souvenirs and mooncakes, began telling the reporter that they were struggling economically, the two women approached and glared at the villagers, who stopped speaking.

"Life is hard, but they won't let us talk about it," Ma said under her breath as the women, who said they were also locals, approached.

Ma gave the reporter her phone number, but when The Times called later, she said only: "We don't have any problems. We are very happy. We are thankful to the government.

"Don't come to the village. We wouldn't dare speak to you even if you did," she added, and hung up.