



The myth of a new China

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Dead center on the front page of *The New York Times*' last Sunday edition of 2019, a headline: "As it detains parents, China weans children from Islam." Its subheading, equally ready for distribution to newspaper stands in Beijing: "New boarding schools redirect faith from religion to party."

The story itself, available online under a different — better — title, is compelling and well-reported. It effectively conveys Beijing's galling oppression of Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other ethnic minorities, many of them Muslim, in China's western provinces. Yet even there, the language seems unduly circumspect. For example, facilities hedged by armed guards and barbed wire where children are forcibly isolated with an explicit intent of breaking up families and erasing their religious and cultural heritage are called "boarding schools" — which, I suppose, is technically not wrong, but neither is it right when the term conjures, for many Americans, visions of *Harry Potter's* Hogwarts and its real-life counterparts, elite educational institutions reserved for the most privileged children.

Such strange descriptive treatment of perhaps the most systematic program of ethnic persecution on the planet today is hardly isolated to a single *Times* article. (In fact, the *Times* has published numerous important reports on the Uighurs' plight.) As *The Week's* Matthew Walther has noted, this despotism is too often downplayed or outright ignored in the narrative of a "new China," a prosperous, modern nation that has left behind the murderous communism of the last century. This narrative is not entirely groundless — China *has* changed, a lot, in recent decades — but in many ways that matter, it's a myth.

The myth of a new China is useful to Beijing, but it is not purely a Chinese export. The American account of the Cold War quite naturally pairs the China of Chairman Mao with Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, and that link makes it easy to forget that when the USSR dissolved, Beijing didn't.

China never had a glasnost, despite years of Western expectation. Protests in Tiananmen Square did not produce a Chinese perestroika. There was no Chinese equivalent of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Three decades ago it may have seemed, as this 1989 *Christian Science Monitor* piece opined, that China's movement toward "economic modernization" would bring it "face to face with the inevitability of pressure for political liberalization." Now the connection of consumerism to social freedom looks far more tenuous.

"Socialism with Chinese characteristics" has produced a strange amalgam of autonomy and coercion. China's nail houses and gutter oil suggest a laissez-faire attitude unmatched anywhere in the United States, yet these small markers of economic liberty coexist with a terrifying surveillance state, public executions, and treatment of minority groups like the Uighurs for which

"genocide" is not too strong a word. The "social credit" system is a waking nightmare. Reports indicate religious texts like the Bible and the Quran soon will be edited to "reflect socialist values," a throwback to Mao if there ever was one, and religious persecution more generally is spiking.

Rising authoritarianism is a hallmark of the tenure of Xi Jinping, China's newly minted "president for life." Once cast as a potential Mikhail Gorbachev of Beijing, Xi has proven to be anything but. By his own account in a 2013 address, the "profound lesson" Xi learned from the fall of the USSR is the danger of allowing national leaders' "ideals and beliefs [to be] shaken." For Xi, reform means getting back to Mao, not away from him. Thus Xi's "presidency has been characterized by an insistence that all individuals in positions of responsibility devote more serious study of and adherence to Marxist-Leninist doctrine," explains Ted Galen Carpenter at *The National Interest*. Xi is "determined to enhance and perpetuate his dominant role," Carpenter continues, and he has used his growing power to move China "toward greater repression and regimentation, not greater liberalization."

The Beijing of Tank Man is, in many ways, still the same Beijing. Likewise the Beijing of the Great Leap Forward (estimated death toll: 30 million) and the Cultural Revolution (estimated death toll: 1 to 10 million), and the Beijing that has violently repressed the Uighurs and sought to eradicate their culture since the end of World War II.

This is not to suggest the China of 2020 is indistinct from the China of 1970. Far from it. Economic quality of life has enormously improved thanks to Beijing's qualified embrace of the open market (and it continues to improve under Xi). In 1981, 90 percent of the country survived on \$2 or less per day; today fewer than 1 percent do. I lived in China's Shandong province for a year in the mid-1990s, and the contrasts I observed returning to the country a decade later were almost unbelievable. Signs of new wealth were everywhere, most visibly in the explosion of personal vehicle ownership. And despite Beijing's increasingly powerful censorship apparatus, the internet allows communication and information access at a previously impossible scale.

Nor do I want to suggest this brutal statism in Chinese governance warrants U.S. antagonism, whether in the form of a break in diplomatic or trade relations or, God forbid, military conflict. The ethics here may be irreducibly complex — anyone who has a simple answer to whether it's better to buy Chinese goods or boycott them is a liar or a fool — but it is hardly disputable that isolating or attacking China would add to the suffering of many ordinary people. War doesn't gentle totalitarian regimes; foreign meddling may provoke a more severe tyranny; sanctions are like to do the poor and powerless more harm than good.

There is no obvious route to ending Beijing's cruelties, among them its efforts to eliminate the Uighurs as a coherent community. And I can offer no conclusive argument for how our rejection of the myth of a new China will accomplish anything, practically. Still, I am certain it is necessary.

The truth is that China has changed much in the last 50 years, but also that recording a history of *only* change obscures a great continuity. And though a modern Tank Man could not be expunged from national memory as the original was, he could still be disappeared, tortured, and killed. Half a world away, there is little to nothing we can do about this. But we can, at least, refuse to call the next Tank Man's prison a "re-education camp" and his children's brainwashing a "boarding school."

