**The Role of Information in Chinese State Strategies of Violence**

By Elayne Stecher

Prevailing theories of state violence argue that the availability of information (or a lack thereof) is a key driver of differential strategies to repress dissent. In particular, states are presumed to use discriminate violence against groups that it has the most information about and can thereby strategically target and strategies of indiscriminate violence against groups for which it has less information. In today’s age of technologies that enable mass surveillance, how well does an informational argument explain differences in state strategies against various dissenting groups in China?

In the “New Era” of China, a previous tolerance of ethnocultural heterogeneity is quickly being eclipsed by new policies intended to promote cultural nationalism (Leibold 2019). These policies -- which range from top-down development projects, encouragement of internal colonization, and “patriotic education” campaigns -- are employed throughout the contentious peripheries of China, including in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet. For a regime that “pathologizes dissent and diversity as an existential threat to the Party and the nation” (Liebold 2019), it is no surprise that the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) would embrace whatever strategies would effectively deter collective action, dissent, and splitism. However, what is less clear is *when* the state will use some forms of violence to quell dissent and not others. What explains the differential state responses to upheaval in Xinjiang and Hong Kong over the past five years? In particular, why have the Muslims of Xinjiang been subjected to campaigns of what is increasingly understood as genocide, while Hong Kongers have been met with relatively restrained policing and a softer policy of *mainlandization,* defined as “the blurring of the physical, social, cultural and psychological border between Mainland China and Hong Kong” (Ma 2015, 46)? This paper explores the applicability of the theory of information to understanding these cases, and briefly evaluates the applicability of other theories which may account for the CCP’s differential strategies across two of its contentious peripheries.

**Puzzle**

The primary factor when considering a state’s internal security strategy is the level of threat posed by each dissenting group. Given the CCP’s heavy-handed control over media -- through practices of keyword censorship, manual censorship, and propaganda -- to deter collective action, it is clear that prolonged protest and violence against state security forces would be inherently quite threatening in the view of the CCP. Taken alone, this would suggest that it is Hong Kongers, only recently “returned” to China in 1997 after 150 years of separation, and whose residents have organized the largest collective action in the city’s history in 2019 (Ramzy and Ives, 2020), would be a highly salient threat to regime stability. The increasing salience of Hong Konger identity since 2008, which has been characterized as “pro-democracy versus pro-Beijing” (Chan et al. 2020, 3), sees a growing number of people in Hong Kong considering their goals and values as diametrically opposed to the cultural nationalism that Xi Jinping and the CCP are trying to promote; Chan et al. (2020) argue that, “Going forward, we should not expect Hong Kongers to simply accept an increasingly mainlanized Hong Kong.” Despite this clear threat, however, state-sponsored violence in Hong Kong has been relatively restrained: although the police have employed “beatings, tear gas and gunfire” in an attempt to quell protests (Rosenzweig 2020), only two protest-related deaths have been reported: one caused by an accidental fall, and the second, allegedly caused by the protestors themselves (*RTHK,* 2018). Furthermore, the state has hitherto foregone a policy of indiscriminate arrests, detention, or violence against Hong Kongers, choosing instead to employ targeted arrests of key thought leaders. They have also elected to use more formal political channels -- such as the passing of the National Security Law in June, the postponement of legislative elections in September, and the withdrawal of the unpopular extradition policy bill in October -- to attempt to control dissent.

While there has been limited collective action in Xinjiang, there have been highly-publicized instances of terror, including the April and May 2014 terrorist attacks in Ürümqi and the 2015 attack of a coal mine, allegedly by Uyghurs. The state’s subsequent response -- to employ mass surveillance, the incarceration of Uyghurs without trial, and the forced participation in “re-education camps” -- was already seen as an excessive use of force that attracted international attention by 2017 (Rajagopalan 2017). Despite the fact that there have been no notable attacks in Xinjiang since 2017, nor large-scale collective action therein, nor any sort of pan-Muslim retaliatory violence from groups in neighboring countries, state violence against Uyghurs has only escalated: as of March 2019, it was reported that there were one million Uyghurs being held against their will in reeducation camps (Ramzy and Buckley, 2019), which is up from an estimated 120,000 in early 2018 (Phillips 2018); reports suggest that Uyghur men were sent indefinitely to internment camps as early as January of 2015 (*The Economist,* 2018). The government has also systematically utilized internment camps to punish birth control violations -- as detailed in the leaked “Karakax List” document -- in conjunction with a campaign of mass sterilization of women in southern Xinjiang, which some experts have argued constitute genocide as defined in the *U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,* Article II, Secion D (e.g. Zenz 2020). In fact, the International Criminal Court’s inability to conduct an investigation into whether China’s mass detention of Muslims constitutes genocide is not due to a lack of evidence of forced sterilization and deportation, but rather, the fact that those abuses “have been committed solely by nationals of China within the territory of China,” which is not a party to the court (Hernandez 2020).

It is clear that, although Chinese officials have levelled the charge of terrorism and splittism against Hong Kongers and Uyghurs alike and both groups pose a high-level of threat to regime stability, the state strategy of repression has differed notably across both cases. Why has the CCP escalated its strategies of violence in Xinjiang to genocidal levels, but shown restraint in Hong Kong?

**Literature Review**

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have sought to understand and theorize state strategies of violence. There are competing theories that attempt to account for differences in state violence in civil conflicts. Kalyvas (2006) frames coercive state violence as a way of generating compliance to state demands. Unilaterally,[[1]](#footnote-0) states can use terror or genocide and mass deportation as part of their coercive apparatus; Kalyvas argues that the selection of one of these strategies over another is dependent upon the *aims of violence:* does the state intend to govern the target population, or not? (28-29). If yes, the state will employ terror; if not, genocide. Genocide, he argues, is premeditated and centrally planned; “genocide is neither mere continuation of severe repression through other means nor just mass killing, but a phenomenon of an altogether different kind” (30). State terror, on the other hand, is similarly indiscriminate but focused more on deterrence than elimination.

For other scholars, the state’s calculus is highly dependent on whether or not the dissident group has relationships that transcend borders, including external sponsorship. For example, Weiner (1971) argues that groups which are politically dominant in one state but politically weak in the other will experience ethnic conflict -- either between the states or within them. Butt (2017) argues that state’s strategies of violence toward secessionist groups will depend, in part, on the level of external support the group receives: “If the state chooses coercion… the extent of third-party support for the secessionists determines how much violence the state employs, for both materialist and emotional reasons” (2). Han and Mylonas (2014) evaluated the influence of external patrons in the Chinese context specifically, arguing that the CCP has three policy options that it can employ toward minority groups: accommodation, integration, and repression/exclusion. The third category includes the deportation, mass killings, and segregation of an ethnic group. Han and Mylonas argue that groups which have, or are perceived to have, external patrons which are an enemy of the state will be seen as inherently more threatening and thus will face more extreme repression. The number of threats a state faces also seems to matter: Butugil (2017) argues that states are more likely to utilize strategies of ethnic cleansings in multifront wars. Walter (2006) similarly argued that states with multiple large groups are more likely to crack down on a territorially concentrated minority group to preempt rebellion and deter other groups.

In her recent investigation of violence in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Blaydes (2018) argues that the level of information a state possesses determines the strategies of violence it will employ; she refers to this as the “legibility” of a dissenting group to the regime: “When the Ba‘thists could not accurately distinguish between those individuals who had complied with and those who had resisted regime dictates, punishment was meted out imprecisely. In other words, the regime meted out punishment based on the precision of its intelligence” (xiv). Illegible citizens or regions are those where monitoring is very costly. The Iraqi regime, Blaydes argues, lacked key information about its population across various ethnic-, religious- and community-levels, which rendered vast areas of its country illegible to the state and resulted in the use of collective punishment (4). Kalyvas (2006) too discusses the importance of information: the usage of selective (discriminate) violence versus indiscriminate violence depends upon the “level at which ‘guilt’ (and hence targeting) is determined… selective violence entails personalized targeting, whereas indiscriminate violence implies collective targeting” (142). Conversely, in those cases where populations are illegible to states, mass killings are more likely. This violence may fall along ethnic lines when ethnicity is used as a heuristic when information is lacking (McNamee, forthcoming,26).

For Blaydes, “legibility” also seems to involve cultural closeness: “In countries where a dictator rules a homogenous population that is culturally similar to the ruling clique, effective monitoring of the population means citizens are constantly worried about members of their own social network who may inform on them… There are few barriers to intelligence gathering within the population and the regime has the capability to mete out punishment with precision” (Blaydes 2018, xv). Kalyvas argues that while political violence has traditionally been most barbaric when enemies are considered infidels, outsiders, savages, or simply, “other,” in civil conflict contexts, “the theory suggests a set of counterintuitive implications, which depart from prevailing views that stress either the effects of ideological or identity-based polarization and hatred, or the consequences of random and anomic violence” (332). For Kalyvas, cultural ties do not necessarily preclude violence, but enable discriminate forms of it: “selective violence requires local information which, in turn, tends to come from denunciations motivated by personal conflicts” (336).

The influence of cultural closeness on strategies of violence may not be purely informational: Butugil (2017) argues that indiscriminate violence, such as ethnic cleansing, is less likely in states where the political cleavages are non-ethnic, such as social-class based or clerical-anticlerical, and more likely in those states where divisions are ethnicity-based (170). This seems to track with Straus’ (2015) findings that non-ethnic cleavages in Sub-Saharan Africa were less likely to end in genocide than ethnic ones; however, Straus’ story may still be one of information, as he finds in Mali that it is the “cousinage ties” between some groups that facilitated dialogue and information sharing which, per Straus, helped avoid a genocide like that of Rwanda (197-202).

**Discussion**

Contemporary China is an important case to consider state strategies of violence against peripheral groups. Methodologically, because many of China’s civil conflicts are occurring concurrently, they allow us to hold constant the regime type, bureaucratic institutions, and international reputational concerns that inform so many theories of state-sponsored violence. Secondly, the difference in state responses -- from genocidal acts against the Muslims of Xinjiang to much more measured and discriminatory violence against Hong Kongers -- gives us both a positive and negative case of genocide against which we can assess the validity of theories of mass killing. Third, the CCP’s historic willingness to subject Chinese citizens to violence to achieve its political aims -- such as the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square Massacre -- belies theoreticization that norms around violence explain state restraint. Lastly, given the escalatory nature of state-sponsored violence over time and the existence of other peripheral groups or areas that seemingly threaten a unitary China (e.g. Tibet), determining what theories are relevant to and predictive of state strategies of violence will have important implications for understanding and assessing the potentials for state violence moving forward.

As *The* *New York Times* discussed in its recent exposé on Chinese state policy in Xinjiang, one of President Xi Jinping’s stated rationales for esclating violence against the Uyghurs was to oppose “terrorism, infiltration and separatism” (Ramzy & Buckley 2019). While this may explain an escalation of state repression of minority groups overall, it cannot explain the difference in repressive strategies in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. As aforementioned in the “Puzzle” section, both Hong Kongers and Uyghurs pose a perceived threat to the territoriality of the People’s Republic of China. Some Uyghurs have been explicitly secessionist in the past, with members of the Turkistan Islamic Party (formerly the East Turkestan Islamic Movement) calling for the creation of an independent East Turkestan in the place of Xinjiang and employing acts of terror in an attempt to coerce the CCP into making concessions. Hong Kongers have historically been less explicitly secessionist, but pose no less of a threat: their calls for democracy are antithetical to the current government’s structure and are seen as preludes to a formal move toward independence. Further, in recent years, the 2014 Umbrella Revolution (a response to Beijing’s heavy-handed attempt to exert undue influence over the Hong Kong electoral system, including the pre-screening of candidates for the Chief Executive of Hong Kong) was followed by a notable surge in support for Hong Kong independence (Fitzpatrick 2016). Both Hong Kongers and Uyghur Muslims, then, have been accused of and punished for inciting separatism and terrorism, and thus seemingly pose a similar level of threat to the regime. Thus, the CCP’s desire to preserve its territoriality and govern in Xinjiang and (arguably, indirectly) in Hong Kong precludes Kalyvas’ argument that the aims of the state explain differential responses to dissident groups.

Nor does the level of external sponsorship seem to explain the differential state responses

in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Uyghur Muslims are seen has having ties to the Islamic world more broadly: they speak a Turkic language; some Uyghurs were involved in resisting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and were trained as *mujahideen;* Xi explicitly likened the crackdown against Uyghurs to the American War on Terror (Ramzy & Buckley 2019). While the Uyghurs are seen as having the support of the Muslim world, Hong Kongers have the support of the Western one: according to *Reuters,* the European Union “put Hong Kong high on its agenda” (Pang et al. 2020); in the United States, President Trump signed legislation that authorized sanctions against Chinese and Hong Kong officials in Hong Kong, “signaling support for pro-democracy activists and escalating tensions with Beijing,” to the anger of China’s Foreign Ministry (Cochrane et al. 2019). An *Atlantic* report out of Taipei noted that “thousands of people in cities across Australia, Asia, Europe and North America [came] out in support of Hong Kong, but also in a much broader sense, against the CCP” (Horton 2019). Thus, both groups enjoy some level of external support, with Hong Kongers seeming to receive substantially *more* backing from rival countries than the Uyghurs.

How much can a lack of information explain the indiscriminate violence perpetrated against Uyghurs? After his 2015 visit to Xinjiang, President Xi argued that “ensuring stability in Xinjiang would require a sweeping campaign of surveillance and intelligence gathering.” This would subsequently include the deployment of facial recognition software, genetic testing, and other forms of big data gathering in Xinjiang; it would also involve “old-fashioned methods” including local informants (Ramzy & Buckley 2019). One *New York Times* report discusses the “God’s eye view” that technicians have of “nearly every corner of Xinjiang,” where technology has allowed the regime to place the region under constant surveillance. “It is a virtual cage that compliments the indoctrination camps in Xinjiang,” the report continues (Buckley & Mozur 2019). Massive surveillance efforts had already begun in Xinjiang as early as 2013 by some reports (Jenz & Leopold 2017). Furthermore, as of September 2018, over 1 million Han Chinese government workers had been deployed in Xinjiang as part of the “Pair Up and Become Family” initiative, wherein state employees would move into the home of Uyghur families, often taking the place of parents who had been forcibly removed to reeducation camps (Kang & Wang 2018). Thus, it is very difficult to argue that the CCP has any sort of informational deficit when it comes to Xinjiang society. Similarly, the state has a strong surveillance apparatus in Hong Kong -- so much so that thousands of protestors held umbrellas over their heads to keep their faces obscured, inspiring the Umbrella Revolution’s name. In an interview, New York Times correspondent Paul Mozer reported that protesters in Hong Kong worried about facial recognition technology, having their subway cards monitored, being filmed by policy and hidden cameras, and other heavy-handed surveillance techniques (Ovide 2020). In terms of having access to personal information for the specific targeting of individuals, the CCP has made both Hong Kong and Xinjiang legible.

It is the second aspect of legibility that may hold more water in this case comparison: the role of cultural closeness. The importance of cultural closeness, however, does not seem to operate via the mechanisms that Blaydes (and Kalyvas) would expect: the state does not lack granular information on individuals that can only be gleaned from local informants. I posit that the importance of cultural closeness in Hong Kong (and a lack thereof in Xinjiang) is instead the perception that groups that fit Xi’s Sinocentric view of the “true” Chinese citizen and are seen as receptive to assimilation efforts will be met with less violence. As noted in Han and Mylonas (2014), accommodation and integration of dissenting groups are the alternatives to violent repression, with co-optation and assimilation as potential mechanisms for the success of integration in particular. Attempts to assimilate Hong Kong and Xinjiang into mainland China have varied notably in success, arguably due to the preexisting cultural linkages between Hong Kong and mainland China (and the lack of those linkages between Beijing and Xinjiang). In Hong Kong, residents primarily identified as Chinese until the 1950s; the growth of a separate Hong Konger identity was not organic, but rather, a backlash against Beijing’s attempts to integrate Hong Kong into mainland China since 1997 (Chan et al. 2020). The lack of historical relevance of Hong Konger’s non-Chinese identity is inherently less threatening to the CCP’s new brand of Chinese nationalism, which is built upon a foundation of shared cultural and historical memory (Wang 2008). Hong Kong’s cries for independence are also less threatening to Mainland China given the relative success of Mainlanders’ efforts to move to and establish businesses in Hong Kong (Ibid). Complementing the success of these internal migration efforts is the fact that the vast majority of Hong Kongers are ethnically Chinese (92% per the 2016 Census). The cultural legibility of Hong Kong explains why the CCP has invested so much in *mainlandization,* even as Hong Kongers have resisted efforts to be assimilated.

In contrast, Uyghurs are of Turkish descent and their population growth over time has “exacerbated spatial ethnic segregation” in China (Zenz 2020, 7). “The Chinese state has consistently sought and *failed* to colonize Xinjiang since the early 1990s,” most recently through the resettlement of Han Chinese via *bingutan* settlement (McNamee, forthcoming, 167). While Zenz notes that population statistics for Xinjiang from 2011-2019 “effectively [conceal] a massive influx of Han, many of whom have been lured to Xinjiang with promises of high wages, free housing, and other types of subsidies,” (Zenz 2020, 6) this migration has been largely concentrated in the northern half of the region, while southern Xinjiang remains almost exclusively Uyghur. Culturally, the Uyghurs do not conform to the CCP’s notion of what a true Chinese citizen looks like, particularly due to the Uyghur’s practice of Islam, which was frequently compared to a drug addiction or disease by top government officials (Ramzy & Buckley 2019). It is this view of religious groups as unassimilable that leads to their unlawful detainment and state-sponsored violence against them: “Since 2017, the authorities in Xinjiang have detained many hundreds of thousands of Uighurs, Kazakhs and other Muslims in internment camps” (Ramzy & Buckley 2019). Even Hui Muslims, who are ethnically Chinese. speak Chinese and no non-Sinitic language, and denounce Uyghur separatism have been interned (Bunin 2020), despite posing no overt threat: it is their threat to Xi’s particular brand of Chinese nationalism and a Chinese state that depends on nationalism, that ultimately affects the state’s calculus of violence.

**Alternative Explanation**

Perhaps the logic of assessing the threat of minority groups to state stability is the wrong approach in evaluating the state’s response to dissenting groups. For example, one could argue that Hong Kong is economically valuable to the CCP due to its special status internationally, such as its favorable trade agreements with the United States and its favorable status in the eyes of foreingn investors. Under this line of argumentation, the types of strategies that Xi Jinping and the CCP could pursue are constrained by concerns about destroying the local economy, alienating foreign investors (and FDI) leading to capital flight, or losing access to Hong Kong’s ports. As one report put it, “Hong Kong’s role as a source of capital, strong rule of law, ease of doing business and educated labor force are factors too powerful for China to discard” (Frost et al., 2020). However, Hong Kong’s economy only accounts for 2.7% of the greater Chinese GDP, down from 18.4% in 1997 (Sin 2019); since the turn of the century, mainland China’s economic growth has far outpaced Hong Kong’s. Thus, while Hong Kong may be economically important for the time being, that importance may not outweigh the perceived threat to a unitary China that Hong Kong currently poses. Furthermore, Xinjiang is itself economically and strategically important: it is a “a resource-rich territory located on the sensitive frontier with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia” (Ramzy & Buckley 2019). Xinjiang is therefore a gateway to trade with the Central Asian Republics, a “Eurasian crossroad” (Block 2013), and a key region vis-a-vis the Belt and Road Initiative. Thus, the economic argument does not seem to predict any sort of differential response by the state to the Hong Kong and Xinjiang cases.

**Conclusion**

President Xi and the CCP have at least three potential strategies of responding to minority groups in the peripheries of China, and have opted to use two of them in recent years in Xinjiang and Hong Kong respectively: violent repression up to genocide, and more discriminate repression coupled with *mainlandization.* I posit that the state’s differential response can be attributed to its belief in the assimilation potential of each group: whereas Hong Kongers can “become Chinese” through propaganda and softer reeducation policies, religious minorities like the Muslims of Xinjiang find their religiosity antithetical to Xi’s ideal, secular Chinese citizen. By this calculus, it is only through the elimination of the “other” -- via internment, sterilization, deportation, and murder -- that Xinjiang can truly come into the fold as part of a unified China. However, given the regime’s historic willingness to sacrifice millions of its citizens for the sake of political and economic progress, the shield of “Chinese-ness” that Hong Kongers possess may not protect them from future, harsher crackdowns if they continue to resist the state’s softer reeducation campaign. We should expect that the CCP’s calculus of violence could escalate over time if integration does not work. While the international community may play a role in the state’s decision making around the escalation of violence, recent work by Conley and Hazlett (2020) argues that mass atrocity events tend to end primarily when the state has achieved its goals or willingly shifts its strategy to one of less violence, and very rarely due to international intervention. This paints a grim picture for the future of minority groups in China who do not look, speak and believe the way Xi Jinping and the CCP believe a “true” Chinese citizen should.

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1. For Kalyvas, state-sponsored violence is unilateral when there is not an organized and protracted counterattack by non-state forces that would constitute civil war or reciprocal extermination. Thus, unilateral violence does not mean the state is unopposed, but rather, that the opposition hasn’t reached a certain threshold and does not hold a competing monopoly of violence to that of the state’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)