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BOOK REVIEW

Xinjiang – eine Region im Spannungsfeld von Geschichte und Moderne. Beiträge zu einer Debatte

Edited by Georg Gesk, Thomas Heberer, Norman Paech, Monika Schädler and Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer

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The volume *Xinjiang – Eine Region im Spannungsfeld von Geschichte und Moderne* [*Xinjiang – a Region between History and Modernity*], published in the book series “Berliner Chinastudien” edited by Mechthild Leutner, Department of East Asian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, presents a collection of ten articles that explore the history and dynamics of Xinjiang/East Turkestan.

The editors, Georg Gesk, Thomas Heberer, Norman Paech, Monika Schädler, and Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, aim to provide a scholarly account of the developments in Xinjiang, the regional and global contexts – “naturally also the Chinese perspective (natürlich auch auf die chinesische Darstellung)” (19) – and the changes in regional politics following the appointment of a new political leadership in Xinjiang at the end of 2021 (21).

This is a significant book in the context of controversies within Germany about the country’s relations with China, not only in the academic field but also in trade and investment, which are issues equally affecting other Western countries in their dealings with China (Fulda 2024). It also – unintentionally – throws important light on the practical and ethical difficulties of carrying out social science field research in China, which have been much discussed in recent years (Klotzbücher, 2022).

Their contributions are based on a field trip by five German scholars to Xinjiang in May 2023, organised by the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences. Following this organised and “self-paid” (21) trip, the two China scholars among them, Thomas Heberer and Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, published an op-ed in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) (Heberer & Schmidt-Glintzer 2023a). Their call for the EU to consider repealing sanctions against China on the grounds that the situation in Xinjiang had normalised triggered a public outcry in the German-speaking China Studies community (Grzanna 2023a, b; Strittmatter 2023, Vogel-sang 2023). Faced with criticism and further enquiries about the other participants, the authors refrained from giving the names of these three participants, Georg Gesk, Norman Paech, and Monika Schädler, or any further information, promising a future publication.¹ A year later, together with four other authors, the group shared their research findings, which are intended to underpin this “normalisation” in Xinjiang, in this edited book. The collection consists of ten articles on Xinjiang, four by the German editors and six others, two of which are in English. Co-editor Monika Schädler who also travelled to Xinjiang, did not contribute any articles of her own.

¹ “We will also not be answering any further questions until then and ask for your understanding.” (Auch werden wir bis dahin erst einmal nicht auf weitere Fragen eingehen und bitten dafür um Verständnis.) (Heberer & Schmidt-Glintzer 2023b); “The duo does not wish to comment further for the time being, but refers to future publications” (Das Duo will sich vorerst nicht weiter äußern, sondern verweist auf künftige Publikationen.) (Grzanna 2023a). Schmidt-Glintzer said in an interview in June 2024, weeks before the publication of this edited volume: “Concerning all other insights, I will not say more because we are preparing for a publication in the foreseeable future.” (Xia 2024).

The book begins with an introduction outlining the editors' aims for their trip to Kashgar and Ürümqi. They stress that their aim was not to investigate human rights allegations, but to assess whether there had been any changes in regional politics under the new Party Secretary in Xinjiang, the technocrat Ma Xingrui, who took office in December 2021. The exact locations and dates of the trip are not revealed, and the people interviewed remain anonymous. The editors write that it involved rounds of talks lasting several hours with 25 different representatives of society. Such large group discussions, prevalent in settings orchestrated by the Communist Party and seen as "worthless" by Western scholars in other contexts in Xinjiang (Hage and Simon, 2024), are inadequate in sensitive settings, where informants are observed by others and therefore not protected, and are thus rather unproductive for sensitive issues in field research. No mention is made of the language used in these "various opportunities for dialogue" (22). Four of the five German travellers speak Mandarin Chinese, but none of them speak Uyghur or Kazakh, so they were largely dependent on the official translators.

Hans van Ess provides in the first chapter a historical overview of the Uyghurs from the 15th to the 19th century. The second part of his contribution is a summary of a travelogue by a person called Qishiyi, meaning "No. 71", who travelled through the so-called Western territories in the second half of the 18th century.

Thomas Heberer, Norman Paech, and Georg Gesk, all participants in the Xinjiang field trip, contribute articles on the organisation of the political and legal system in Xinjiang. Heberer's chapter provides a historical perspective on the development of society in Xinjiang and the increasing security threats that have led to harsh coercive measures. At almost 90 pages, beginning in the 19th century, Heberer argues that the ethnic politics and growing securitisation in Xinjiang is a reaction to national and international threats. The framing of his analysis within the concepts of a "development state" in the first part and a "civilising" or "disciplining state" in the second part of his chapter is unconvincing. Discipline presupposes clear rules and norms according to which behaviour is practised and sanctioned. After the 2009 ethnic clashes in Ürümqi, the state intervened arbitrarily, as Heberer himself writes. The rule of law was suspended. From 2009 onwards, the state's actions became unpredictable: the deportations to the camps from 2017 onwards were arbitrary; a Xinjiang researcher reported "with tears in his eyes" a "traumatic situation" (125) in which the state lost control and answered with repression. To judge from these testimonies from the field, or interviews with experts, this led to "blatant unprofessionalism" and "encroachments" (231) by executive organs, such that the years of Ma's predecessor, Chen Quanguo, and others, seem to have been characterised by the regime itself more by chaos, arbitrariness, and violence. When state action is no longer based on norms and laws are dismantled, the "disciplinary regime" becomes more like a regime of outright terror, though Heberer does not use this term.

Unfortunately, only half a page is devoted to the actual conditions in the detention camps. Heberer does not rely on this field study, and it is unclear what, if any, data they collected on

the situations in the camps. Heberer bases his discussion of the camps on the official White Papers of the Chinese Government, “although it [actual practice] is far more complex” (143). The conditions in these camps, in turn, are discussed in a footnote only.

Apart from a few visual impressions that are not really explored or categorised, it remains unclear how Heberer scientifically measures and evaluates “normality” and “normalisation” from 2022—something that can only be done in a diachronic comparison. The names and actions of the four officials from Xinjiang who were sanctioned by the EU in 2021 because they are held responsible for the mass detentions and organisation of the camps and human rights violations (EU 2021) simply remain unmentioned throughout the anthology. It therefore remains unclear what the reference points are that the authors can use to measure the normalisation of conditions repeatedly postulated throughout the edited volume and initially also in the NZZ article (Heberer/Schmidt-Glintzer 2023). Instead, the statements of Xinjiang Party Secretary Ma Xingrui, scattered here (129) and throughout the book in various chapters, attempt to put his own actions in a better light by painting a gloomy picture of the situation before his tenure in Xinjiang. The resulting positive exaggeration and boosterism about the current situation under Ma is unquestioningly adopted in the book by Heberer and the other participants in the field study. Well-documented phenomena such as the harsh 100-day curfew imposed by Ma Xingrui in Xinjiang at the beginning of 2022, protests against which served as the starting point for the nationwide White Paper reform movement, the increasing forced migration of workers from Xinjiang, or the effects of the Sinicisation of Islam, the ongoing destruction of mosques and religious shrines, the separation of children from their parents, and the continued imprisonment of Uyghur scholars such as Rahile Dawut, Tashpolat Tiyp, or Ilham Tohti — all human rights violations attributable to the reign of Ma Xingrui as party secretary in Xinjiang from 2021 to 2025 — remain unused as cases and data to triangulate and challenge the officially propagated “normalisation” after 2021.

Overall, Heberer follows mainly the lines of discourse set by the Communist Party. The number of terror attacks is contested. Instead of examining documented practices in camps and prisons, Heberer focuses on educational practices and language courses intended to create a Chinese nation, as they are also represented in the official Chinese media. A Chinese source describes the military operations in the villages as a “civilising mission” (“zivilisierende Mission”, 141), whereas others describe them as draconian measures (AFP 2018). It is suspect when the ideological language of civilising others is accepted as an analytical tool and concept. Heberer could certainly have learned from Mechthild Leutner’s contribution about the ethnic, and thus colonial, discursive position one takes when one assumes that something is “in need of civilisation” (370). What is missing is a critical evaluation of these measures using additional sources. Instead, Heberer writes without comment: “According to the report, the villagers were very grateful for the efforts of the working group” (142). This style of course

is a well-developed narrative used by the Communist Party and familiar from the *Peking Review* (now *Beijing Review*), the former employer of Heberer in his early years (Xu 2008).

Norman Paech, an expert in international law and former member of the Bundestag for the left-wing party *Die Linke*, provides what I consider to be the weakest contribution in this anthology. This is not just a matter of the selection of sources being one-sided and not up to academic standards. Paech claims that there is no reliable footage from the camps (191). Images and documents from the Xinjiang Police Papers, published in this journal (Zenz 2022), have been examined by media institutions and their authenticity confirmed (Grüll et al. 2022); the authenticity of this material is not disputed in academia, a fact which Paech ignores. It is part of scholarly discourse to question data or the “maximum number” (191) of prisoners, but in scholarly discourse one must also put up for discussion one’s own figures and one’s own proposed more precise counting criteria, otherwise the criticism remains unconvincing. Given the years of denial by the CCP and the lack of access for independent scholars to the camps, waiting for a legal review, even by “independent institutions” (191), is pointless. Paech’s assertion that the lack of an independent constitutional judiciary in the People’s Republic is “the people’s right”, “which follows from the people-centred approach” (189), ignores the well-documented objections by victims to ongoing oppressive legal practices.

Georg Gesk, another member of the field trip to Xinjiang, also draws attention in his article to how the establishment and development of the rule of law is linked to the fight against terrorism in Xinjiang. He outlines the development of the rule of law after the Cultural Revolution. The discussion of legal norms is followed by a discussion of the internment camps in Xinjiang. Like almost all the authors in this volume, Gesk’s choice of government documents does not include legal practice as opposed to theory: Gesk does not analyse the voices of former detainees (Byler 2022 et al.) who, for example, had to spend much longer than the legally prescribed time in these centres without their families being informed. He ignores the extensive material, such as the literature on the structure and organisation of the centres, and victim reports, which would provide an uncensored, if naturally subjective, insight into the “training centres” (in the text without quotation marks, 241).

Far-reaching conclusions are drawn from superficial and selective observations in the controlled environment of travel (“Mosques continue to characterise the cityscape of Kashgar”, 235). In such a travel environment, one’s own observations are helpful, but one’s susceptibility to manipulation must also be taken into account. The unfiltered acceptance of what one sees without checking it against other sources comes close to what Björn Alpermann (2024) calls “naïve empiricism”.

Gesk attempts to address demographics and access to education for the Uyghurs in two paragraphs with evidence from another chapter in the book and an article posted on WeChat

(243). The one-sidedness of what is written in juridical texts and laws also requires an assessment of ongoing practical implementation on the ground. Including the real situation would have added a crucial “Chinese perspective” (19), as the editors say they intend to do.

Is there genocide in Xinjiang, and what is the history of genocide in a global context, is the question posed by Barry Sautman. Sautman examines the history of the concept of genocide and “bloodless genocide”. Sautman’s aim is not to examine events in Xinjiang in detail, but to compare them with similar cases outside China in the 20th century. Unlike the Holocaust, there is no evidence of the planned murder of an ethnic group. This is already the scholarly consensus. From a global perspective, Sautman thus draws attention to an important reason for the growing intensity of the Xinjiang debate. However, the many carefully documented cases outside China that Sautman has compiled here end up in an unenlightening comparison with what has happened to the Uyghurs and others in Xinjiang. Little is learned about the actual structures and components of *cultural* genocide.

Yitzhak Shichor’s contribution is an excerpt from an article published in 2023 with an added “postscript”. He examines the activities of Uyghur exiles and the World Uyghur Congress, focusing on their lobbying and advocacy for sanctions in response to what they characterise as genocide. He criticises the effectiveness of these efforts and of the EU Parliament’s resolution on human rights abuses in Xinjiang. His statement that the EU Parliament’s decision “condemned China’s actions against the Uyghurs as a violation of human rights and ‘genocide’” is simply wrong; the EU Parliament’s resolution (EU Parl 2020/2913(RSP)) does not use this word at all. In the postscript to his contribution, too, the author would have done well to stick to the facts. Instead of expressing indignation that “the WUC campaign demonstrated sheer stupidity” (329), it would have been more pertinent to analyse its lines of action and discourse, including comparisons with other NGOs, because their efforts were not so unsuccessful, since a great power such as the USA and other states accepted this “vision of genocide”. Shichor’s explicit predictions seem to be based on unrealistic assumptions. What “will not happen” (332) happened in November, a few months after publication: Volkswagen sold its factory in Xinjiang (Nilsson 2024).

The last three articles examine Xinjiang not only as a territory in its own context and history, but also as an object of discourse. Mechthild Leutner and Hauke Neddermann analyse the discourse on Xinjiang in Germany and the negative coverage of Xinjiang. Leutner traces the historical context of Sinology and its influence on current debates, while Neddermann attributes the negative image of China to the evolving coverage of Xinjiang.

Mechthild Leutner here examines the discourse on Xinjiang from a historical perspective, how it is embedded in the discourse on China with its negative and positive projections. She traces a rich and fascinating arc from the beginnings of Sinology and the attitudes of the Jesuits to the current discourse on China and Xinjiang. The emerging enthusiasm for Mao as part of a pop and rebellious culture and for Maoism as an alternative modernity and its

influence on Sinology and the genesis of Modern China Studies in the 1970s, which in Germany, as in the USA, France, and Italy at the time, led to debates and long-lasting frictions, is not discussed, as in other publications by Mechthild Leutner. In the recent criticism of the NZZ 2023 editorial, she sees “the continuing effect of narratives and clichés” (339). However, the constructed polarity of the discussion between those who want to cooperate with and understand and those who want to warn about and disengage from China is artificial. Both are certainly extreme positions. Reality is reflected precisely in the nuances which these extreme positions elide (Fulda 2024, 98). The meticulously listed criticisms and assessments of the China experts is unbalanced. Ole Döring as nearly the only author supporting the NZZ article is quoted 19 times.

There are many documented cases of self-censorship and transnational repression. It is reductive and trivialising to dismiss these acts of (self-)censorship by China scholars as merely the judgement or perception of scholars and other authors.

Neddermann examines the coverage of Xinjiang in Germany and attributes the negative coverage in the media to an increasingly negative image of China in the wider society. Here, too, in a discourse analysis similar to Leutner’s, the weaknesses of an exclusively perceptual approach become apparent. With the publication of their own book, the complaint expressed here and by Leutner that there is no room for a “pluralistic debate” (425) seems incomprehensible.

In the final two chapters, Udo Barkmann and Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer discuss the role of Xinjiang in the broader geopolitical context, emphasising its importance as a transit area in the “New Great Game” between the great powers.

In his contribution, Udo Barkmann shifts the focus from the China discourse in Germany back to the international context of Xinjiang. He describes the evolving role of Central Asia, highlighting its importance as a supplier of raw materials and energy. The southern route of the Silk Road, which bypasses Russia via Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea, has gained in importance as a result of the ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Although his arguments are compelling, Xinjiang plays only a minor role in this comprehensive text.

Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer also addresses the region’s role as a transit area in a “New Great Game” (498) between the great powers, historically Russia and Britain, and now Russia, the US, and China. In his discussion of the Tarim Basin, he traces its history from early settlement to the present, excluding the northern part of Xinjiang. Before 1949, the British and Russians had zones of interest on China’s borders. In line with official CCP discourse, the East Turkestan Republics of this period are not mentioned. Schmidt-Glintzer’s assessment of the “establishment and consolidation of the People’s Republic within its present borders, including Taiwan” (“Etablierung und Konsolidierung der Volksrepublik in ihren heutigen Grenzen, Taiwan eingeschlossen...”, 487) is false, as Taiwan has never been ruled by the

People's Republic of China (PRC). Similar statements in line with the PRC's current positions and narratives appear throughout Schmidt-Glintzer's text, such as "Die Frage der Zugehörigkeit Taiwans zur VR China, lange Zeit unstrittig ..." (496) ("The question of Taiwan's belonging to the PRC, long undisputed ..."). In contrast, German or European policy has never accepted or even followed the so-called One China principle and German-Chinese diplomatic agreements leave out the status of Taiwan (and Berlin) completely.

Those looking for empirical evidence for a reassessment of existing sanctions against Xinjiang after Thomas Heberer and Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer's Xinjiang op-ed will be disappointed with this book. The results of the field study play only a minor role in the book, and do not support their proposition of "normalisation" with scientific evidence. The authors are reluctant to compare the human rights situation under Ma's predecessor, Chen Quanguo, with the continuing abuses under Ma from 2022. The question of the whereabouts of prominent Uyghur scholars Rahile Dawut and Tashpolat Tiyp is raised in the introduction, but remains unmentioned throughout the rest of the book. Heberer and Schmidt-Glintzer's (2023a) assertion in the NZZ of a "return to normality" merely echoes Ma's slogan of a "rapid return to normality" (183), repeating what the party secretary told them at a meeting in Ürümqi. The high political level of the discussions is remarkable and never explained in the book: when they spoke to Ma Xingrui in Ürümqi, they were speaking to the highest political representative of Xinjiang. No researcher who travels to Xinjiang on his or her own initiative can simply meet the highest levels of the CCP leadership. Ma and the meeting with the German study group are not mentioned at all in the September 2023 NZZ article. In their first outline and explanations to the public of their field trip, they list only talks with "legal institutions" and "discussions with representatives of villages, townships and counties" (Heberer & Schmidt-Glintzer 2023b).

In addition to these omissions, there is an obvious weakness in their approach: If the authors want to refute the accusations of other scholars, they need to address these arguments and show them to be false; merely ignoring the existing grounds and lines of argumentation is not enough. For example, what the four officials sanctioned by the EU (EU Parl 2021/2644 (RSP). 2021) have done or how and if their position has changed in a way that justifies considering the lifting of sanctions, remains completely untouched in this volume. The sources they use here are often one-sided: the reliance on government documents and official statements without independent verification or additional sources undermines the credibility and objectivity of their findings. The book fails to integrate the evidence for human rights abuses in Xinjiang and the voices of victims, as documented in sources such as the Xinjiang Victim Database or the Xinjiang Data Project, or other scholarly publications beyond the influence of the CCP. On the contrary, the authors attempt to establish a counter-discourse close to the established lines of discourse of the CCP, partly with information, unproven and not

independently confirmed, obtained from high-level Party officials such as Party chief Ma Xingrui.

The book *Xinjiang – eine Region im Spannungsfeld von Geschichte und Moderne* will not become a “litmus test for Sinology” (Feldwisch-Drentrup 2024). The authors are unable to provide sufficient scholarly arguments for a comparative normalisation from 2022. Nevertheless, this volume is a disturbing read, with its explicit one-sidedness and resonance with CCP narratives. Written mostly by tenured and retired full professors from German universities, it is a questionable example of “embedded research” (Klotzbücher 2013) and undisclosed positionalities. Undocumented compromises undertaken for exclusive rights and access (Lovell 2015) go hand in hand with opaque connections to senior CCP leaders. This volume shows that the conditions for academic cooperation with China and field research in Xinjiang are deteriorating, and for field researchers in China, this book is an elaborate warning of its dangerous pitfalls.

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