Essay

The Choice of an Oppressor

Y.N. Tang†

“But I am a member of the oppressors.” As a Han Chinese person living outside the Great Firewall – therefore with access to information on the situation in Xinjiang – I kept on thinking to myself during the discussion of “How to Engage With the Oppressor” that I, in fact, have been complicit in what increasingly looks like a cultural genocide.

By the end of 2018, the Chinese government had detained an estimated 800,000 to possibly two million Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, and other Muslims in Xinjiang.1 The party-state has used the terms “vocational training centers,”2 and, more recently, “boarding schools”3 to describe internment camps with mass forced labor. There is little access for almost anyone who is not an employee of the state to these camps. But according to the few escapees or former employees, detainees are coerced to use Chinese only and repeatedly recite party-state propaganda; some of Muslim faith have been forced to drink alcohol or eat pork.4

Outside the camps, life exceeds the wildest darkest dystopian imagination. It is reported that some 2.5 million residents of Xinjiang are

---

† Y.N. Tang is a student at Yale Law School.


being closely surveilled. In addition to the use of cutting-edge surveillance technology, Han government officials have been stationed in individual homes; neighbors are instructed to spy on one another; checkpoints abound, where Uyghur and other Muslim minorities are subject to regular, invasive strip searches.

If I want to be honest and coherent as an aspiring human rights advocate, I should not stay silent for any longer on what the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been doing to the Uyghur people. As a Yale Law student, I have brainstormed novel legal theories to promote human rights along with my peers. But I never expected that, while in law school, I would see such a blatant large-scale instance of crimes against humanity being committed in real time, and happening in my country.

I do not even like to call the CCP “my government”; after all, I never had and likely never will have the right to vote in a free, open election as a Chinese national. But I also do not have another government. Besides, I am a Han person, a member of the ethnic majority (92%) of the most populated country on earth.

I have been thinking about the “dominance versus oppression” distinction ever since the roundtable discussion, when one of the discussants provocatively stated: “‘oppression’ is not the same as ‘dominance.’ Dominance is a sociological position; being an oppressor is a choice.”

I am at least a member of the dominant group vis-à-vis the Uyghur and Kazakh people. Am I an oppressor?

How would you choose? How should I choose?
I am so scared, all the time.
But I am angrier than I am scared.
When a member of the dominant group chooses to not be an oppressor, she pays a price. This has been happening and will continue to happen to Han Chinese people, even to those not directly working on Uyghur advocacy.

Maybe someday in the future, when looking back at my time in law school, I might point to spring 2019 as when that fear and anger started to swallow me.

On March 20, 2017, police detained labor rights activist Wei Zhili for his advocacy on behalf of migrant workers, including silicosis victims. In late March, constitutional professor and scholar of jurisprudence Xu Zhangrun of Tsinghua was suspended from teaching and research for his criticism of Xi Jinping’s authoritarianism. Professor Xu told the New York Times, “Thinking is in our...
blood . . . . Unless you liquidate me, how could you ever stop me doing my research?”  

Human rights attorney Wang Yu was detained and released outside the U.S. embassy in Beijing in the same week. She was previously arrested in 2015 among a large number of rights defenders, and ultimately released after filming a televised confession.  

On April 9, the nine democracy activists and leaders of Occupy Central were convicted by the Hong Kong Court on public nuisance charges. Among them was Chan Kin-man, a Yale graduate and sociologist. In giving his “final lecture” at Chinese University of Hong Kong back in November 2018, Chan told the hundreds of students in the audience: “I hope you do not give up – we can only see the stars in the darkest hours.”

These days, I have so many questions, but no answers. None.

As I roam in freedom in another hemisphere of the world, I struggle with constant guilt: Why am I free, when so many people that I care about or admire are not?

How should activists engage the oppressor? What happens, when some of the activists themselves come from the dominant group? What unique advantages do we have, and what particular risks do we face?

Should I trust this Chinese graduate student at Yale, whom I just met? How do I know this person does not work for the Chinese Consulate, or will not report me for even the limited activism I have done?

What should I make of Derrick Bell’s “interests convergence theory,” when there seems to be no way to “converge” the interests of the Uyghur people to access dignity and human rights with the authoritarian control of a regime insistent on erasing their culture and autonomy?

Would there ever be a legal theory to bring a case in the International Criminal Court (the crimes against humanity just seem so blatantly apparent), when China is not a party to the Rome Statute but a permanent member of the Security Council?

Why cannot Chen Quanguo, the Xinjiang party boss and architect of the detention camps, be sanctioned under the Magnitsky Act already?

---


I think about people too. And thinking about them makes me sad, enraged, consoled, and invigorated, often at the same time.

I think about Professor Rahile Dawut, the formidable academic and guardian of Uyghur culture with international prominence, who has been disappeared since December 2017.12

I think about my young Han friend, who used to conduct research in Xinjiang and who has been incommunicado for more than a year.

I think about Serikzhan Bilash, co-founder of Atajurt Kazakh Human Rights, who was arrested by the Kazakh police and charged with “inciting ethnic strife” for his advocacy on behalf of the Uyghurs.13


I think about the millions of Uyghurs who have lost their freedom, as well as their family members in and outside of Xinjiang, who are being closely surveilled and constantly threatened.

I think about my Han Chinese friends, especially the ones who dismissed anything I tell them about Xinjiang as “appropriate government actions,” “counter-terrorist,” and “necessary measures.”

I think about my parents, who have chosen to stay depoliticized after being on the Square in 1989, and who worry about me any time I speak up about human rights.

On this journey, there may be dominant groups and the dominated groups. But oppression oppresses the oppressors as well. In order to liberate anyone, we must liberate everyone. Eason Chung, one of the nine activists of Occupy Central, aged 26 at the time of his April 2019 sentencing, reminds me (also aged 26) why the answer lies in solidarity:

We must destroy the self that is moulded by a system of rules and power, and venture into a world full of unknowns and tangled in history, personal struggle, and manifold coincidences. We must care about our world and not just our place in it . . . . We need to understand that the powerful collude within the political economy, and to find the right spot and hammer on it relentlessly. There are no saints to follow on this journey. We will be lost, and the selves that we have been building will crumble and approach destruction, but in the end we will be reborn.14

