



**White Paper: A Response to International
Efforts of ‘giving bad name’ (*wuming hua*)
to the Vocational Education and Training
Works in Xinjiang**

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Abstract

The establishment of so-called vocational education and training camps in Xinjiang has been one of the major sources of human rights contention between the West and China in the recent years. For about three decades, China has been issuing White Papers (WPs) on human rights, Tibet, Xinjiang, ethnic and national minority issues, and religious believe to propagate its human rights vision and records. Interestingly, maximum numbers of WPs on Xinjiang were released between 2014 and 2019 and three of them were published this year. The latest one covers the issue of vocational education and training centres, the content of trainings and their implications in the program of de-radicalization in the conflict-ridden Xinjiang. It is argued in the paper that the purpose of publishing WPs on sensitive issues like Xinjiang is to construct and disseminate official interpretation which is mostly not consistent with the reality. The paper gives a brief outline of the WPs on the above issues, major assertions made in the WPs on Xinjiang, development of vocational training in the region. It also provides a critical analysis on the proliferation of vocational education and training camps in the region.

Keywords: Human rights, terrorism, religious extremism, vocational education, de-radicalization

Reports on mushrooming of detention camps¹ across Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) started coming out in the international press since the beginning of 2018. Initial reaction of the Chinese government was complete denial of existence of such camps in the Muslim dominated province of the western China. However, the local authorities continued to build new compounds, and openly advertised in the websites for contracts with specific size of the camp area and material required. The satellite images and available tender notices with place names confirmed newly constructed sites all over Xinjiang which look identical of massive internment infrastructure (Thum 2018). The Chinese government maintained this stand in the 96th Session of the United Nation Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) held in June 2018 (Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders 2018).

The Chinese delegates reiterated their earlier position when they met the CERD in August 2018 and claimed that criminals with minor offences were provided with assistance and education for their reintegration with the society. For the first time they mentioned that the offenders are assigned to vocational education and employment training centres and their legal rights were protected in these centres (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2018). It was after several months of criticism of recent escalation of coercive polices and racial cleansing in

¹ These camps are also referred to as internment camps and even concentration camps in the Western writings. The Chinese official documents and articles however describe them in different ways, namely, re-education camps (再教育营), transformation offices (转化所), De-extremisation training classes (去极端化培训班), and education and transformation training centres (教育转化培训中心), and vocational education and training centres (职业技能教育培训中心).

Xinjiang by the Western countries, on 16 October 2018 the governor of XUAR, Shohrat Zakir stressed the need of vocational education and training centres in the process of counter-terrorism, stability maintenance and de-radicalization in the region. He also discussed elaborately legal basis of setting up of these centres, contents of vocational education and training in these centres and the implications (Xinhua net 2018).

In the face of condemnation of the existing policies in Xinjiang by the Western countries, China has been making utmost efforts to dominate in global public opinion and engage a large number of foreign leaders, media persons and scholars to rally behind its discourse on Chinese struggle against terrorism and extremism in the region. Chinese desperation is most evident from the fact that the government has issued three White Papers (WPs) on Xinjiang from March to August 2019, namely, 'The Fight against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection' (18 March); 'Historical Matters concerning Xinjiang' (21 July); and 'Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang' (17 August). The WP published in March discusses on vocational education and training work under the section titled 'adhere to preventive anti-terrorism in the first place' and the latest one specifically focuses on the issues related to vocational education and training in Xinjiang. The paper analyses reason behind issuance of this WP and its implications, China's latest efforts of re-educating Xinjiang population, mainly the Uyghurs, significance of imparting vocational education and training in confinement, and sustainability of such policies.

White Papers

Since China published its first government WP titled 'Human Rights in China' in November 1991, the country has published around 112 White Papers. Roughly speaking, 19 White Papers were published on Human Rights, 13 on Tibet, 10 on Xinjiang, 5 on ethnic issues, and 3 on religious belief. It is evident that more than 40 per cent of the Chinese White Papers cover issues like human rights, Tibet, Xinjiang, problem of ethnic minorities and religion. What is the reason behind publication of so many WPs on sensitive domestic issues? The answer lies in China's Leninist tradition of information control, construction and dissemination of political discourse through propaganda, and state's monopoly over channels of information flow.

The release of the WPs on these issues on regular basis has helped China to demonstrate its willingness to share its view on human rights, and information related to the manner in which it protects human rights of the people of all sections of the society including Tibetan, Uyghur, and other minorities and religious groups. China is now a very active participant in the international human rights regime. It has learnt to appropriate the language of human rights, and created space for its interpretation on human rights. China claims its commitment of adhering to the principles of human rights since the communist revolution in 1949 and sticks to its pledge of fulfilling material needs of its citizens. Chinese huge success in poverty alleviation often overshadows its human rights records, ruthless treatment of political dissidents and pro-right peoples, and draconian policies towards Tibetans, Uyghur, and other marginalised groups. In fact since the publication 2002 WP titled 'Human Rights Records of the United States in 2001', China elevated itself as the most staunch critique of human rights violations in the USA. It is evident that the WPs target the foreign audience than the domestic ones and ultimate goal is to develop China's global image. However, the country's image

continues to face challenge due to its overzealous approach to safeguard its national interest, nationalist ambitions and hyper-sensitivity on the question of sovereignty in Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea.

Tibet has been the core of the debate on human rights issue in China since 1950s therefore remains one the most important themes in the Chinese WPs. China published three WPs on Tibet before it came out with the first White Paper on Xinjiang in 2003, and Tibetan problems gets maximum mention in the WPs on human rights, religious belief and national minority policy and practice in China. This also shows that Xinjiang problem was not a major concern of the international community until the 9/11 terrorist incidents in the US in 2001.

The areas covered in the WPs on both Tibet as well as Xinjiang include historical justification of territorial ownership; economic and cultural backwardness of local ethnic population; peaceful liberation and emancipation from the exploitation of ordinary ethnic masses by the feudal landowners and religious authority; guarantee of personal freedom, national autonomy, and political, religious and other civil rights; economic advancement and all-round development in education, language, culture etc.; preferential policies; progress in human rights; and origin of pro-independence forces in the two minority regions and Chinese struggle against them. These WPs give emphasis on the administrative achievement of successive central governments in pursuing the principle of equality among ethnic groups, enhancing ethnic unity, and raising living standard and quality of life of minority peoples in the region. Due to different nature of ethno-national movements in the two regions, violence and terrorism, concern for national security and social stability has been getting more prominence in the WPs on Xinjiang than in case of Tibet in the recent years.

Pledges and Assertions

Out of ten WPs on Xinjiang, only two were issued in the first decade of the 21st century and they were released in the backdrop of the 9/11 incidents in 2001 and subsequent global war against terrorism, and the 5th July riots in Urumqi in 2009 respectively. And seven WPs have been released between September 2015 and August 2019. During the period between the Urumqi riots in 2009 and publication of the third WP on the region, a host changes took place not only in the political, social, economic, and cultural life of Xinjiang under the local party secretary Zhang Chunxian but also in the Chinese polity under Xi Jinping. Xi's ambitious global outreach program BRI have transformed geopolitical and geoeconomic climate in Xinjiang and in the entire Eurasia. From 2013 to 2015 the region experienced unprecedented rise of intensity and frequency of violent incidents. The central and regional leadership have made efforts to understand the root cause of the problem since the Urumqi riots in 2009, and first and second Xinjiang Work Forum were held in 2010 and 2014 respectively. As a result of the churning of party's ideological and theoretical orientation regarding ethnicity, some new ideas, approaches and methods of governing Xinjiang and handling separatist violence in region have been evolved which are incorporated in the WPs released since 2015.

The WPs titled 'History and Development of Xinjiang' (May 2003) and 'Development and Progress in Xinjiang' (September 2009) provides narrative of development and building of 'beautiful and prosperous' region. However, the

latter also acknowledges that the development in the region is not balanced and stresses the need for exerting greater efforts into poverty-alleviation in southern Xinjiang. Both the texts identifies the “Eastern Turkistan” factions as the main separatist force responsible for endangering lives and livelihood of people of various ethnic groups in Xinjiang, disturbing social stability in the region, and threatening national security of China and other countries in the region. The 2009 WP offers more detail discussion on the “Eastern Turkistan” forces and mentions the entry of East Turkistan Islamic Movement in the UN list of international terrorist organizations. Both the documents mention that in the face of growing international pressure and anti-terror cooperation the “Eastern Turkistan” forces have been using the ‘banner’ of democracy, freedom, human rights, and accusing China for oppressing ethnic minorities. It appears from these two texts that other than claiming growing threat to the development and stability posed by the separatist forces and correctness of the existing state ethnic policies towards the region, Chinese leadership did not have any idea how to devise proper plan to fight extremism, separatism and terrorism.

The three forces (religious extremism, ethnic separatism and terrorism) have long been identified as the threat for the region, but on the basis new findings about the ground situation the September 2015 WP claims that ‘religious extremism has developed into a real risk’ endangering national and ethnic unity, undermining religious and social harmony, jeopardising ‘lasting stability’ and threatening life and property of all ethnic groups of Xinjiang. It also asserts that extremist ideas misrepresent and breach Islamic theology, and the extremist groups try to convince teenager Muslim youths to heretic ideas that martyrs engaged in *jihad* lives in the heaven after death. The religious extremism has been further discussed at length in the WP titled ‘Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang’ (June 2016). It maintains that religious extremism is ‘by nature anti-human, anti-society, anti-civilization and anti-religion’, and its ultimate aim is to establish theocracy. It is also noted in this WP that the Xinjiang government, drawing lessons from the international community’s experience of combating and containing religious extremism adopted the policy of “de-extremization”.

It is claimed in the June 2016 WP that the Xinjiang government carries out “de-extremization” and crackdown on terrorism and religious extremism, related propaganda and, attempts of inciting people in accordance to the law. And in the process government also upholds modern civilization and healthy cultural development, people’s well-being, and international cooperation in combating physical and cyber terrorism and preventing proliferation of religious extremism. The authorities also give importance to management of religious affairs in accordance to law and make full use of the religious circles in popularising ‘scripture study with Chinese characteristics’, condemning religious extremism, and guiding religious believers to right and legally acceptable life style.

The WP on development and progress of human rights (June 2017) proclaims China’s commitment of realising ‘full human rights’ including right to freedom of religious belief and ‘normal’ religious activities, which is conditional to the basic norm of “protecting the lawful, banning the unlawful, containing the extremist, resisting the penetration, and punishing crime”. Legally undefined ‘normal’ religious activities and above conditions in fact bring all religious practitioners under the purview of “de-extremization”.

The March 2019 WP elaborates how China is fighting against terrorism and religious extremism and safeguarding human rights in Xinjiang and shares its experience of pursuing preventive counterterrorism approach. The preventive approach prioritises following measures: wiping out the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism; fighting and preventing terrorism at the same time; taking aggressive action against violent terrorist crimes; addressing problems at its source; improving public wellbeing; promoting knowledge of law through education; offering education aid through vocational education and training.

Vocational education and training

It has been pointed out in the official as well as unofficial accounts that the basic education, technical and vocational education (TVE), and adult education in the ethnic minority regions of China remain underdeveloped. Ilham Tohti, presently incarcerated Uyghur dissident author and former professor of economics has analysed how low level of basic education in southern Xinjiang² adversely affected Uyghur labours' capacity to engage in modern agriculture and overall industrialisation process. Due to lack of adequate education and vocational skills, it has also been difficult for the surplus agricultural Uyghur labour force to find meaningful job after migrating to urban areas (Ilham Tohti 2011). Moreover, there has been little government initiative towards skill development and specialized vocational training among ethnic population in the region.

Lack of overall educational standard in this part of Xinjiang turned out to be great obstacle both in economic wellbeing of the people and socio-cultural development. Over a few decades since the economic reform and opening started in China, the symptom of undevelopment and underdevelopment and growing sense of deprivation among alienated Uyghur population created a fertile ground for extremism and violence.

The 2009 WP on Xinjiang informs that adult and vocational education started from scratch and offers some data regarding percentage of ethnic minority students in secondary and higher vocational schools in the region, which does not give any real picture of the actual achievement in this area. It is in fact evident that the government started taking serious initiatives in the field of rural medical insurance, basic education, high school level vocational training for the rural and pastoral population and pre-school bilingual education after the first Xinjiang Work Forum in 2010 and some of them were later incorporated in the 12th FYP (2010-2015). As for vocational education and training, the Ministry Education's Secondary Vocational Education Reform and Innovation Action Plan (2010-2012) recommends that areas with high concentration of ethnic minorities should receive extra weight in TVE education resource allocation (Wang 2017: 16). Since Xi Jinping called for deepening of economic reforms and innovation at the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee, the party leadership is giving greater emphasis on spreading vocational education in the less developed and ethnic minority dominated interior provinces and develop employment oriented vocational education.

² He observes inadequate investment in the basic education as well as huge gap between northern and southern Xinjiang in this regard. There has been serious imbalance in the distribution of educational resources among various ethnic groups at the middle school level. The Uyghur students' share of resources in terms of funding and number of school is far less in proportion to their numerical strength. For example, Kucha (Aksu) and Shache/Yarkant (Kashgar), two hugely populated counties have only one Uyghur language high school each. As a result, student enrolment rate at the high school is also extremely low in the south (Tohti 2011).

The Second Xinjiang Work Forum (2014) observed acute unemployment problem of educated Uyghur and Kazakh population, and low level of education, legal awareness, superficial and distorted knowledge of Islam among largely religious minded masses in Xinjiang. To address this problem, the regional and central leadership gave emphasis on the re-education and made it an important component in combating terrorist threats and separatist violence, and encouraging local ethnic population to resist religious extremism and terrorism.

The 2015 WP reports that from 2010 to 2014 rate of student enrolment in all level of education in Xinjiang have increased and during this time a full system of vocational education came into place with 176 secondary vocational and technical schools providing education for 219, 500 students. It is informed in the WP that “three exemptions and one subsidy”³ has been implemented for high schools and secondary vocational schools in the four prefectures of southern Xinjiang. The government also introduced nutrition improvement program for all rural students undertaking compulsory education in 36 counties and all city level junior school classes specially set up for minority students in Xinjiang.

This is also the time when Xinjiang government intensified its efforts to boost up bilingual education. Aimed at popularising standard Chinese by 2020, in 2013 Xinjiang government launched “training program on the standard spoken and written Chinese language” and a special program for ethnic minority youths participating in vocational or business training in ethnic minority dominated counties and cities (WP 2018).

It appears that the regional authority under Zhang Chuxian took some concrete plan to resolve certain key issues related to education and make people of all ethnic groups capable of fulfilling their desired role to whole heartedly participate in future development programs in the region.

The 2017 WP also describes in detail the measures taken to develop vocational education and organise employment oriented training program by the Xinjiang government. It seems that the regional leadership has planned to enhance employment generation for college graduates, impoverished families, excess peasant and herdsman labour, rural women, and institutionalise long-term mechanism to ensure work for at least one member of each family of the region. The paper also provides with education related data which show improvement of all sectors of education including vocational secondary schools, number of students in vocational schools, adult education, and increase of educational expenditure. It also informs that 747 vocational training bases are established to train 110,000 physically challenged persons from both urban and rural areas.

Removing malignancy

While a series of long-term initiatives were undertaken for transforming livelihood, educational level, economic foundation, social milieu, cultural essence, religious contents, customs, attitude and habits, psychological makeup, and national affiliation and identity awareness (*rentong yishi*) of broad Muslim masses of Xinjiang, since 2010 the regional authority continued with coercive measures to fight violence and extremism, combat real, perceived, virtual and cyber threats, prevent possible attacks, and punish terrorists, criminals, and potential attackers.

³ This means exemptions of tuition fees, textbooks, boarding fees, and subsidised living expenses for resident students. The purpose is to realise 14-years of free education.

Good or bad, the former party secretary of Xinjiang, Zhang Chunxian took much more gradual and balanced approach to govern the region during one of the most violent phases of Xinjiang history in the recent years and considerably reduced incidents of terrorist attacks by the end of 2015. It is still not very clear as to why Zhang Chunxian was unceremoniously replaced by Chen Quanguo, who acquired nation-wide fame of an innovator of ethnic policies and pacifier of Tibet during his tenure there.

Chen took charge of Xinjiang in August 2016 when hardly any report of violent incident in the region was published in the international media and relative peace was about to settle. In contrast to Zhang's moderate image, the new leader is known for his hard-core approach. It is evident that Chen Quanguo, entrusted by the 'core' party leadership to permanently resolve Xinjiang problem became keen to prove his worth and with a very short time applied some 'innovative' methods to further restrict life of Uyghur population and gradually extended his iron rule to curb freedom of other Muslim communities in the region. Of all the draconian policies he has introduced, establishment of detention camps has captured maximum attention of the international community.

The rectified name of these camps, according to Shohrat Zakir, the governor of XUAR is vocational education and training centres. In term of objective of training, trainees, approach and method of instructions as well as experience of former trainees, this kind of vocational education is quite different from the initiatives taken by the regional authorities until 2016. The WPs issued in March and August 2019, which have designated Xinjiang to be the 'key battlefield' (*zhu zhanchang*) in the fight against terrorism and de-extremization, offer enough information to have fair idea about these centres.

The August WP concedes that serious terrorist crimes are now limited in number and it envisages that religious extremism and minor violation of law will be curbed by educating and rehabilitating people. The text however describes these not-so-serious terrorist crimes and minor violation of law as 'malignant tumor' (*duliu*) of terrorism and extremism and vows to eradicate this social malignancy. In pursuit of this mission a group of vocational centres have been established to stop terrorist attacks; wipe out roots of religious extremism; provide better educational and vocational skills; make trainees employable citizen and raise their income; and maintain stability and ever-lasting peace in the region. The WP is also published to explain Chinese point of view in response to mounting international pressure and the Western design to discredit China's de-extremization efforts.

The document maintains that these centres conduct 'law-based'⁴ education and training. It provides a long discussion on the differences between unlawful acts and criminal acts in Chinese law and how they are handled by different organs of the government and legal authority, namely, public security, administration, procurator and judiciary. On the basis of these differences, the trainees of the vocational education and training centres are divided into following three categories: 1. the people who participated or were influenced or forced to

⁴ 'Law-based' implies that education and training is practiced in line with the spirit and requirements of the rule of law in China, ideas and principles of counter-terrorism and deradicalization as practiced by the international community, and some recent laws and regulations passed by the central and Xinjiang governments like the National Security Law of the PRC, the Criminal Law of the PRC, the Criminal Procedure Law of the PRC, the Regulation of Religious Affairs, the Counter-terrorism Law of the PRC, and the Regulations of the XUAR on De-extremization (WP 2019, August 16).

participate in terrorist or extremist activities that were ‘not serious enough to constitute a crime’; 2. those who participated or were influenced or forced to participate in terrorist or extremist activities that pose real danger but do not cause actual harm; and 3. those who were convicted and served sentence of imprisonment for terrorist or extremist crimes.

The definition of first category of trainees is problematic. They are not involved in any act which could be called crime in accordance to the Chinese law. In fact, their involvement in the so-called ‘terrorist or extremist activities’ are solely based on subjective assumption of individuals at different level of law enforcing agencies. If the government feels their training is required, they have enough resource to do that separately. From the above discussion on the recent development in the field of Chinese language learning and vocational education for the ethnic minority students in Xinjiang, it appears that this category of trainees could be incorporated in various kinds of training programs in regular institutions in the region or in other provinces of China. Other than intimidating an entire population by putting a large number of could-be-turned into terrorists, there is no reason to arrange vocational education and training for the first types of trainees along with second and third categories of trainees in the same premises.

At the same time, the third category of trainees, who already received punishment for their crimes and released from jail after proper assessment are clearly going through double punishment during their detention in the pretext of giving vocational training in the centres. There are enough legal provisions in the Prison Law of the PRC (Articles 4, 64 & 66) to carry out cultural, occupational and technical education for the prisoners in accordance with the needs of production in the prison and of employment after the release. According to the law, every prison should have educational facilities such as classrooms and reading rooms. There are also provisions for issuing certificate of technical grade to an individual prisoner if he clears corresponding examination (Prison Law of the PRC, December 1994).

According to the legal provisions in criminal law, criminal procedure law, and counter-terrorism law, the three categories of people are treated, trained and assisted to find jobs. Exemption from punishment especially for the second category of trainees, and leniency with which trainees’ employability and capacity to reintegrate with the society is assessed depend on confession (*renzui*), repentance (*huizui*) and willingness to receive training in these centres. It can be easily perceived how difficult it is to confess and for some deed which is ‘not serious enough to constitute a crime’ according to the law of the land. The on-going re-education drive in Xinjiang reminds us of long confession sessions under auspices of Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).

The content of education and training and vocational skill development courses are also discussed in the August WP. Apparently the course contents of Chinese language, laws and regulations, policies on ethnic and religious affairs, and religion far exceed occupational and skill development activities. The WP also narrates the progress report of these vocational education and training centres in the following areas: the breeding ground and conditions that give birth of terrorism and religious extremism have been eliminated; comprehensive quality of trainees have improved; religious extremism has been eliminated; social atmosphere has turned better and more stable; the education and training centres have won general support; and international community has made positive assessments on Xinjiang government’s efforts.

In support of global acclamation of these centres, the text gives reference to the visiting dignitaries from foreign countries including diplomatic envoys, the UN officials, and Geneva-based senior diplomats of various countries as well as more than 40 groups of delegates from political parties, civil society organization, news media, and various religious organizations. The WP highlights Muslim countries' support to China's policy towards Xinjiang. It is well known fact that the China makes arrangements for majority of these delegates to showcase brighter side of the development in Xinjiang and other minority regions of the country. It is not clear whether all these delegates were taken to actual vocational centres.

The text does not substantiate the achievement of the vocational education and training with any data. It is not clear how many centres exist, number of trainees in each centre, their background including educational level, duration of their stay in the centres, number of graduates from these centres, range of their age, placement after training, and rehabilitation program and the follow up plans. It is also not clear who are the teachers or instructors in these centres and their background.

Conclusion

After nearly three decades of violence and counter-violence in Xinjiang, China seems to have shifted its attention to the local roots of the problems in this Muslim dominated region and identified home grown religious extremism as the germ of all troubles. It can be inferred from the text that a huge number of young potential terrorists who came under the influence of religious extremism were born and brought up in China when it made the greatest achievements in terms of economic prosperity and this section of young population in Xinjiang are left out from the entire development process. The government now feels that they are deserved to be re-educated and trained further so that they can become useful citizens.

In the vocational education and training centres, they first need to acknowledge their crime (*zui*)/mistakes and become remorseful, and then express their willingness to go through the re-education program assigned to them by the state authority. They should unlearn 'fabricated' religious knowledge and "domestic discipline", and forget many habits, attitudes and social behaviour which they acquired in the absence of state vigilance. Following the emancipation of their mind, the trainees of the centres are given training in Chinese language, law, religion and vocational education. This huge arrangement has been made to cure social malignancy of Xinjiang. It is however not convincing enough that this program will substantially help the target population to get back to the right track.

The WP claims that the vocational education and training is hugely successful and some Val Thompson wrote in an article in *International Focus* (a US magazine) that the young Uyghur trainees in the training centre that he visited in Kashgar were genuinely happy. The WP also includes some more words of praise and appreciation of Xinjiang's efforts to fight terrorism. Like all previous WPs on sensitive domestic issue, this one also serves its purpose as a propaganda material.

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