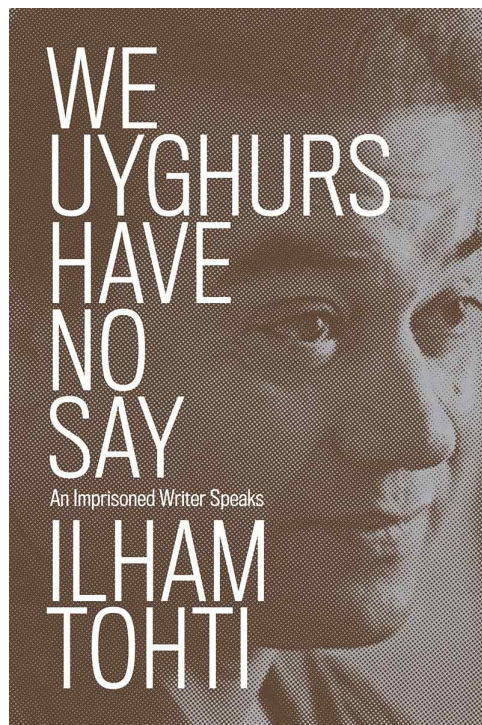


Book Commentary:

**“We Uyghurs Have No Say” by Ilham Tohti  
- Lessons on Colonialism from an Imprisoned Chinese Dissident**

*Historical parallels demonstrate that the contours of colonialism  
in Asia today are all too familiar* By Jeremy Ray Jewell



*We Uyghurs Have No Say: An Imprisoned Writer Speaks.* Ilham Tohti. Published by Verso Books.

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In 2011, in two military commission cases involving Guantanamo Bay prisoners, the US Government affirmed that it holds that its mostly one-sided (if not outright genocidal) conflicts with Indigenous peoples were wars against terrorism. It cited precedent for the military prosecution of “providing material support to terrorists” as a war crime in Andrew Jackson's execution of two British citizens during his 1818 invasion of Seminole lands in Spanish Florida (with the aim of recapturing fugitive slaves).<sup>1</sup> If Andrew Jackson were alive during the War on Terror, we could assume he would have agreed with the Government's terminology. For Jackson, there was never any question that Indian autonomy was incompatible with the US. As he said in a message to Congress in 1829, “I informed the Indians inhabiting parts of Georgia and Alabama that their attempt to establish an independent government would not be countenanced by the executive of the United States.”<sup>2</sup> Native religion, as well, could never be compatible, as he made clear in 1830: “And is it supposed that the wandering savage has a stronger attachment to his home than the settled, civilized Christian?”<sup>3</sup> All this despite the so-called ‘Five Civilized Tribes’ having adopted centralized governments with written constitutions, intermarriage, Christianity, and even chattel slavery.

What Andrew Jackson leveraged against Native Americans then was the equivalent for his time and place of the “three evils/forces” (三个势力)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel T. Morison, *History and Tradition in American Military Justice*, University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law, Vol. 33 (2011) SSRN [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1852504](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1852504) (last visited Mar. 3, 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Jackson, “State of the Union Address, December 8, 1829”, *State of the Union Addresses of Andrew Jackson*, Project Gutenberg (2002) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5016/5016-h/5016-h.htm> (last visited Mar. 3, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Id. “State of the Union Address, December 6, 1830”

<sup>4</sup> This slogan describes the target of so-called counter-terrorism operations in Xinjiang as the three connected phenomena of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. Although the slogan has become a prominent fixture of China's Xinjiang policy since 2017, the official definition appears to have

today in the People’s Republic of China (PRC): terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. Like its Jacksonian predecessor, these “three forces” have been used to deprive Indigenous minorities of their autonomy and resources. Rather than Georgia or Alabama, today this is happening in China’s northwestern Xinjiang province… whose whitewashed name, “New Province”, clearly articulates Chinese colonial ambitions for it. The name, in fact, goes along with a myth of Han migrants as ‘frontier pioneers’.<sup>5</sup> All this despite the fact that its Indigenous Turkic Islamic people, Uyghurs, have, like the ‘Five Civilized Tribes’ in the US before them, largely capitulated to the demands of the dominant Han Chinese civilization occupying their ancestral lands. Uyghurs have adopted Mandarin, the Chinese Constitution, Communist Party (CCP) politics, intermarriage, and, to an increasing extent, state atheism. This has done nothing to stop their persecutions, which also resonate with Native American experiences: arbitrary detention in internment camps, restricted mobility, forced separation of children from parents and placement in boarding schools for ‘reeducation’, suppression of cultural and religious practices, and discrimination in work, Party, and public life. A systematic effort to close mosques and limit the circulation of Qurans coincides with a depreciating of the language, culture, and people themselves. Second-class citizens in their own lands, Uyghurs have become reviled for the conditions which their conquerors force upon them, despite their every effort to conform. They are blamed for crime when they are disadvantaged,

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been solidified 15 June 2001 by the “Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism”, signed by China, Russia, and several Central Asian states – after September 11th, and after the Russia-Chechan conflict entered its guerilla phase. United Nations High Commission for Refugees, *Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism*, Refworld, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/49f5d9f92.pdf> (last visited Mar. 3, 2022)

<sup>5</sup> Ilham Tohti notes: “By using slogans like ‘developing terra nullius’ and ‘developing the wasteland’ and other ignorant slogans [about the colonization of Xinjiang by Han people], countless young people have been influenced to treat minority ethnic people and regions with utter disregard. These slogans inculcate them with the idea that they’re the pioneers on this land.” “The Need to Mount Long-Term Resistance to Totalitarianism and Ethnonationalist Chauvinism”, *We Uyghurs Have No Say*, Verso, 9 (2022). Elsewhere, in an essay written upon official government request, Tohti appears to embrace Xinjiang’s “pioneering spirit”. Id. “Present-Day Ethnic Problems in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: Overview and Recommendations” 88.

accused of separatism when they are excluded, and labeled fundamentalist when modernity is systematically withheld from them. This should sound all too familiar.

In November 2021 the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide published a report which outlines state violence against the Uyghurs from 2017 to the present. These include forced sterilization/abortion, forced labor, sexual violence, torture, mass surveillance, and more, with the Museum stating that it is "gravely concerned that the Chinese government may be committing genocide against the Uyghurs".<sup>6</sup> Still, the plight of the Uyghers lies buried behind international concerns of Chinese militarism. It is not the same Western *cause célèbre* as Tibetan independence in the 90s, with its exoticized religion *en vogue*, or the 1989 pro-democracy movement, with its strongly socialist components mostly overlooked to this day.<sup>7</sup> Nor does it possess the same kind of international attention and capital accumulated behind its cause as the Falun Gong. Nevertheless, the Uyghur problem may finally prove a nut that is too hard for the emerging superpower to crack. Uygher intellectual Ilham Tohti feared so, before his imprisonment.

Thanks to a recently published collection of his works in English entitled *We Uyghurs Have No Say*,<sup>8</sup> a larger international audience can now choose to familiarize themselves with this leader of the community which has apparently so threatened China's rulers. Ironically, the essays, interviews, and other documents demonstrate,

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<sup>6</sup> Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, "'To Make Us Slowly Disappear' The Chinese Government's Assault on the Uyghurs", *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* [https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/November\\_2021\\_Uyghur\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/November_2021_Uyghur_Report.pdf) (last visited Mar. 3, 2022)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Andrew G. Walder & Gong Xiaoxia, "Workers in the Tiananmen Protests: The Politics of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 29 (1993) <http://www.tsquare.tv/links/Walder.html> (last visited Mar. 3, 2022)

<sup>8</sup> Ilham Tohti, *We Uyghurs Have No Say: An Imprisoned Writer Speaks*. Yaxue Cao, Cindy Carter, & Matthew Robertson trans. Verso. (2022)

above all, that Tohti was a dedicated Chinese and Communist. This, nevertheless, did not stop China from arresting him in 2014, sentencing him to life imprisonment for “separatism” after a two-day trial, and holding him incommunicado since 2017. His true crime? If we are to trust the man’s own words in this collection, most of which were directed toward Han and the CCP (of which Tohti was a member), his crime was to take literally the Constitution of the PRC and the Party’s own stated interest in ethnic problems. Tohti tried more than anything else to bridge the divide between Han and Uyghur. At times, the faith which he demonstrates in his writings toward his Government is astounding. The Government’s reactions prove that, despite what they say, they want nothing more than to exacerbate the divides that exist in China. They have inadvertently proven Tohti’s own observation correct that the platform of the Communist Party has become nothing less than “totalitarian ethnonationalism”.<sup>9</sup> Every indication shows that the State has never wanted assimilation more than resources and territory, and has never wanted the suppression of the “three forces” more than the suppression of its own people.

Tohti warned of the growing tensions in Xinjiang before the 2009 riots in the capital Ürümqi. These riots would help pave the way for the rise of Xi Jinping and his key policies of extralegal persecution of Party critics and increased Han ethnonationalist rhetoric. In 2005, Tohti urged China to reconsider its historical answers to “ethnic problems” in light of their practical failings: The Uyghur Autonomous Region established in Xinjiang was never, in effect, Uyghur nor autonomous.<sup>10</sup> Uyghurs were unable to administer their lands and Han migrants constantly came to benefit more. The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) – functioning much like the Dutch East India Company and others before it – is a Han-dominated state-sanctioned mix of paramilitary group and economic enterprise which Uyghurs have long come to see as more of a colonizing force than a development agency.<sup>11</sup> By the early 2000s, migrating Han came

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<sup>9</sup> Id. “The Need to Mount Long-Term Resistance to Totalitarianism and Ethnonationalist Chauvinism”, 9-10

<sup>10</sup> Id. “The Source of Xinjiang Ethnic Tensions as I See Them”, 3-8

to represent 75% of the population of Ürümqi, and their superior resources and political influence left Uyghurs to concentrate in effective ghettos around the South Gate district.<sup>12</sup> As a result, he says, “Xinjiang is the only place in the world where local university graduates have a lower status than migrant farmers.”<sup>13</sup> Uyghur grievances, Tohti asserts, were profoundly social – disenfranchisement, inequality, discrimination. These were the real evil forces which the CCP had promised to eradicate in 1949 with their arrival in Xinjiang. And absent from Tohti’s analysis and proposed solutions, at least, are any evidence of the CCP’s alleged “three forces” of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism, which have formed the backbone of the Government’s responses to problems in Xinjiang in recent decades.

In fact, Tohti recommended a more successful implementation of the existing policies of ethnic autonomy, stating that “The core problem is not that the vast majority of Uyghurs want independence. Only a very small minority believe that Xinjiang independence is the only way to solve the problem. Most Uyghurs accept China’s sovereignty over Xinjiang; they simply seek a truly meaningful kind of autonomy.”<sup>14</sup> He referenced academic Ma Rong on ethnic problems<sup>15</sup>, stating that China should abandon outdated Soviet models focused on “political transformation” in favor of an American model of “cultural transformation”.<sup>16</sup> He would later clarify his position: “I don’t

<sup>11</sup> Id. 4, 24, 59, 77-8, 88-94, 138, 173

<sup>12</sup> Id. 4

<sup>13</sup> Id. 5

<sup>14</sup> Id. 26

<sup>15</sup> For an English account of Rong’s positions cf. Ma Rong, “A New Perspective in Guiding Ethnic Relations in the Twenty-first Century: ‘De-politicization’ of Ethnicity in China”, *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 8 (2007) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14631360701594950> (last visited Mar. 3, 2022)

<sup>16</sup> Ilham Tohti, *We Uyghurs Have No Say: An Imprisoned Writer Speaks*. Yaxue Cao, Cindy Carter, & Matthew Robertson trans. Verso. (2022) 15-16

completely approve of the ‘cultural transformation’ of minority groups in the United States; the ethnic problems you see there aren’t any better than ours. [...] However, correct values about racial equality can be promoted through the American media and other means. After incidents occur, the media, politicians, and police officials can all reflect and reconsider and express their views about the incidents without inflaming racial feelings.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately for Tohti, such reflection and reconsideration in China would indeed come at the expense of increased incidents and inflamed racial feelings.

In the wake of the 2009 riots Tohti was detained for two months without charge. Changing his tone from foreboding caution to a reconciliatory plea, he would give a speech at Minzo University that year, the basis for the essay “Isn’t It Time to Rethink China’s Ethnic Policies?”<sup>18</sup> Tohti argued repeatedly for a reevaluation of China’s ethnic policies and their implementation, each time with practical reasons and advice, and each time taking the CCP and the Chinese Constitution at their word. Never to be found in Tohti’s work is a chauvinism for either ethnicity, region, nor religion. He reminded his audience that “Chinese law clearly states that ethnic autonomy is a fundamental state institution. [...] According to the 1982 Constitution and the 1984 Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law, ethnic minorities have the right to use and develop their own spoken and written language. Members of ethnic minorities may hold key positions in local administrative bodies. They have the right to preserve their own folkways and customs and enjoy religious freedom. They have the right to use their ethnic languages to develop schools of all levels and types and the government has the responsibility to establish ethnic schools.”<sup>19</sup> Rights which Tohti is always clear will inevitably drive Uyghurs and Han closer together. “The natural merging of ethnicities and the creation of societies in which diverse ethnic cultures can coexist and learn from one another,” he insists, “is an unstoppable historical trend that no one will really oppose.”<sup>20</sup> It is only by

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<sup>17</sup> Id. 27

<sup>18</sup> Id. 11-29

<sup>19</sup> Id. 22

allowing cultural and educational sectors to freely develop, “to keep pace with the times and with history”, that China “can weaken ‘the three forces’ by denying them ground in which to take root.”<sup>21</sup>

While expressing pro-democracy sympathies, Tohti is nevertheless skeptical of democracy’s ability to solve the ethnic tensions in China. His comparison of Xinjiang to Palestine or South Africa<sup>22</sup> readily shows why. And this comes to the crux of what lies behind China’s fear of “separatism”. More than anything else, it is a fear of foreign intervention, constantly coached in terms of exoticizing the “West” and recalling historical sentiments of colonial victimhood. For that reason, Tohti responded to accusations that he was a ‘running dog’ for the foreign powers: “The United States needs rational Chinese intellectuals just like China needs the same in the United States.”<sup>23</sup> He really can spare no kind words, on the other hand, toward the unthinking vessels of pseudo-Leftist anti-Western ideologies: “I really hate these ignorant leftists— they’re the running dogs.”<sup>24</sup> As much as contemporary post-colonial discourse in the West must not ignore the current anti-colonial grievances of peoples in places traditionally considered non-Western, an even-handed critique of China’s Xinjiang policies, indeed, ought to include a critique of ourselves.

To start with, then, we must acknowledge that real anti-colonialism rests on objective facts and practical realities, not mere posturing and language games. A few years ago a video circulated online of Black students at South Africa’s University of Cape Town declaring that scientific disciplines and their accumulated knowledge, for all their historically eurocentric biases, were inherently racist and ought to be abolished.<sup>25</sup> Whether consciously or not, these students (so-called ‘Fallists’) have repeated the same basic formula of fundamentalism

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<sup>20</sup> Id. 101

<sup>21</sup> Id. 65

<sup>22</sup> Id. 78

<sup>23</sup> Id. 165

<sup>24</sup> Id.



which has motivated groups such as the Taliban: rejection of modern scientific objectivity and the universality of empirical Truth. At the same time, these students have also repeated the basic formula of Chinese “whataboutism”: everyone else is the “West”, and nothing we do can ever be as bad as the *other*. In that way we also rationalize our way into a rejection of Truth. Both are very seductive arguments. Fundamentalism and fascism both have a profound appeal to people confronted with social instability, and we should be careful not to become the ‘running dogs’ for either. To begin with, we may want to reject the assumption that only Islam is susceptible to fundamentalism, and not the secularized Daoism which passes for Chinese state atheism today. Certainly, at least, we must recognize that colonialism and fascism have never been the strict purview of the West. To believe that they are is to essentially repeat an ideology which has become the ‘big lie’<sup>26</sup> of Chinese state propaganda today... to conceal from Chinese citizens the basic fact that today, as Bong Joon-ho observed, “we all live in the same country, called Capitalism”.<sup>27</sup>

Tohti threw this ideology out himself, saying that “Han people need to reflect more on their own nationalist and fascist attitudes. Over the past twenty years, Han people— especially the younger generation — have grown up drinking the wolf’s milk of nationalism. They are very emotional and angry, and their chauvinism is quite serious. To put it

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<sup>25</sup> UCT Scientist, *Science Must Fall?*, YouTube (Feb. 10, 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9SiRNibD14> (last visited Mar. 3, 2022)

<sup>26</sup> “Big lie”, or “große Lüge”, although first attributed by Hitler to Jews, was adopted as a foundational principle for Nazi state propaganda. As defined by Hitler, it functions on the principle that the masses “more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie [since] it would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.” Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, James Murphy trans., Hurst & Blackett (1939) 185.

<sup>27</sup> Birth.Movies.Death., *Bong Joon-ho Discusses PARASITE, Genre Filmmaking And The Greatness Of ZODIAC*, YouTube (Oct. 16, 2019) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXuXfgquwkM> (last visited Mar. 3, 2022)

bluntly, some in Han society have turned fascist against us.” It is worth noting that European and Japanese fascisms began by voicing reactions against perceived national humiliations, not at all unlike the “century of humiliation” (百年国耻) identified as the basis for the founding of the New China.<sup>28</sup> Blaming a minority group, the next step in the process, is carried through with complete disregard for its illogicality. Tohti protests that “the reality is that China is ruled by the Han. So they should bear some responsibility for this country and for our fate. You’re the ones who have made us integrate. You’re leading us, and as leaders you must take responsibility and be inclusive and tolerant. If 1.3 billion Han cannot tolerate 10 million Uyghurs, then how can you talk about unity or harmony?” The lie is obvious, but it means nothing. The appeal of fascism is strong enough to make the truth irrelevant. This, again, is not Europe or North America which we’re speaking of.

For our part, those interested in progressive, democratic, anti-colonial discourse among the United States and its allies can reflect on our roles in Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> As philosopher Slavoj Žižek noted in his *Trouble in Paradise*, “Is the rise of radical Islamism not exactly correlative to the disappearance of the secular Left in Muslim countries? When Afghanistan is portrayed as the utmost Islamic fundamentalist country, who still remembers that, forty years ago, it

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Nicholas Ross Smith & Tracey Fallon, “How the CCP Uses History”, *The Diplomat*. (2021). <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/how-the-ccp-uses-history/> (last visited Mar. 3, 2022) In fact, this historiography is central to official ethnic policy itself. Cf. Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, “Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities in China” <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cegv/eng/zt/ztzgrq/t187368.htm> (last visited Mar. 3, 2022), particularly I.2, “The Patriotic Spirit Formed During the Fight Against Foreign Invasions in Modern Times Is the Political Basis for Practicing Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities”

<sup>29</sup> Including South Korea’s role in Afghanistan, instrumental in building its “global Korea” image. Cf. David Axe, “South Korea’s Secret War”, *The Diplomat*, Apr. 27, 2010 <https://thediplomat.com/2010/04/south-koreas-secret-war/> (last visited Mar. 3, 2022)

was a country with a strong secular tradition and a powerful Communist party which took power there independently of the Soviet Union?”<sup>30</sup> That is to say, through successive Soviet and American intervention arming various groups against the other superpower, Afghanistan’s civil society was destroyed. Islamic fundamentalism is not the product of Islam nor of Afghani ethnic passions… it is the direct result of policies which leave Afghanis with no other ways to articulate their very real social grievances. Tohti says the same of extremism in Xinjiang, where “doubts and fears have led many Uyghurs to adopt a form of silent resistance by privately turning back to traditional culture, religious worship, and a strengthened sense of ethnic identity.”<sup>31</sup>

In fact, this pattern of modernization curtailed by external interference is visible in earlier, pre-Communist epochs of Uyghur history. When the Qing dynasty first named the Uyghur lands “Xinjiang” they also brought three decades of severe rule, instability, and ethnic conflict. This culminated in an uprising led by Uyghur intellectuals which established the independent Republic of Eastern Turkistan in 1933, inspiring a brief but profound explosion in independent, secular culture. ‘Islamicized’ rebellion would only break out in the region in 1937 after the installation of a pro-Soviet Chinese warlord, Shen Shicai.<sup>32</sup> Speaking in a 2012 interview, Tohti notes that that dynamic has only since been repeated:

“We once had our own perfectly good system of clothing, culinary culture, and music. Why are these now all becoming increasingly Islamicized? It’s because ordinary people have lost all hope in their government, in society, in Uyghur intellectuals, and in secularism. The government was first to destroy the forces of secularism. These should have been most able to interact

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<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*, Melville House. 117-8 (2017)

<sup>31</sup> Ilham Tohti, *We Uyghurs Have No Say: An Imprisoned Writer Speaks*. Yaxue Cao, Cindy Carter, & Matthew Robertson trans. Verso. (2022) 101

<sup>32</sup> Dolkun Kamberi, “Uyghurs and Uyghur Identity”, *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 150 (May, 2005) 3-7

with Han society and the government, but the government destroyed them instead. So Uyghur society has moved in a completely different direction and become distorted.”<sup>33</sup>

Tohti’s vision, that of a necessary, autonomous progression toward modernity and national unity through an embrace of traditional folkways, should never have been considered the radical separatism or religious extremism that it has been characterized as. If the CCP had any concern whatsoever for their alleged ideological foundations they may well find resonances between Tohti’s platform (or that, indeed, of Ma Rong and others calling for the depoliticization of ethnic questions) and the work of Marxist thinkers on culture elsewhere in the world. All that, it would seem, has become impossible, as “socialism with Chinese characteristics”<sup>34</sup> has slowly but surely morphed into “totalitarian ethnonationalism”, as Tohti called it.

I recall the American protest folk song written by Peter LaFarge, “The Ballad of Ira Hayes”. Hayes, one of the six soldiers to raise the US flag on Japan’s Iwo Jima island, was an Indigenous American – a member of the Pima tribe of Arizona. A hero in name only, in the song he returns home to poverty, disenfranchisement, and dismissal as a stereotypical, ‘drunken Indian’... not a citizen with special needs, to whom is owed a national debt.<sup>35</sup> It is the self-fulfilling prophecy of a colonized people, and a direct result of systematic exclusion after having still ‘done everything right’. Like the Uyghurs, Hayes’ people were left with no way to actually join the society which vilified them

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<sup>33</sup> Ilham Tohti, *We Uyghurs Have No Say: An Imprisoned Writer Speaks*. Yaxue Cao, Cindy Carter, & Matthew Robertson trans. Verso. (2022) 140

<sup>34</sup> “Socialism with Chinese characteristics”, or “中国特色社会主义”, although officially beginning with Maoism’s insistence on rejecting Soviet precedence and adapting to concrete Chinese conditions, has come to be a catchall phrase for any and all official state policies, including those perpetuating Soviet models of ethnic relations which are at the heart of Tohti’s critiques. Cf. A. James Gregor, *Marxism and the Making of China: A Doctrinal History*, Palgrave MacMillan (2014)

<sup>35</sup> Peter LaFarge, *Ira Hayes and Other Ballads*, Columbia (1962)

for their difference and separation. It was never even the intention of that society to incorporate and coexist with them, but to replace them. Similarly, Ilham Tohti’s efforts to build bridges – and the Chinese official disregard for them – demonstrate that no matter what, China has wanted its Uyghurs to be nothing more than instruments of the “three forces” in order to facilitate their eradication as a people… neither the “century of humiliation” nor the New China has ever belonged to them.