

## **China: A Settler Colonial Empire?**

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### **Abstract**

China's rapid expansion is a growing concern to many in the west, yet the history and pattern of its meteoric rise is deeply misunderstood. Surprisingly, its rise may bear many similarities with that of the rise of many western states. This paper will examine a constellation of China's territorial and cultural expansions. Furthermore, it will examine ongoing and future expansions of the Chinese empire. It will examine Chinese actions in Tibet, the Yunnan province, the Guizhou province, Taiwan, the Belt and Road Initiative, and examine China's ongoing treatment of Uyghur Muslims. These subjects will also be qualitatively compared to settler colonial theories, as described in a western context, to uncover similarities and points of contention to determine if the rise of the Chinese empire is mostly explained by theories of settler colonialism.

## Background

Settler colonialism is a unique form of colonization that extends beyond what one normally imagines a colonized area as. It includes the removal of indigenous peoples from their land and the subsequent replacement with the colonizing group.<sup>1</sup> This process includes the removal of not only the people, but also their culture, symbols, and everything that could leave a trace that indigenous people were there. Furthermore, as this process is being completed, deep denial takes place whereby settlers act as if the land was rightfully theirs. This brutal act is called settler colonialism and is generally theorized into four stages: discovery, displacement, destruction, and denial. One should not slip into the easy habit of conceptualizing these stages as events on a linear progression of history, rather these stages attempt to describe an ongoing structure. Each stage occurs simultaneously and folds into one another to create the form of settler colonialism that is largely responsible for the geopolitical landscape of the world today and is typically expressed in terms of race.<sup>2</sup>

Discovery is the first step of settler colonialism. While no land that has people already living on it is ever truly “discovered” in the scientific sense, the existence of indigenous land becoming visible to those who will soon become settlers is critical to settler colonialism. Even the grammar associated with a settler’s “discovery” of indigenous lands is itself a form of settler colonialism whereby the perspective of the settler group is already assumed as the starting point for discussions of land – if it is new to the settlers then it must be ontologically new. Furthermore, it is from the starting point of centering discourse around the perspective of the settler that all future acts of settler colonial violence must then be justified. Indigenous cultures and peoples are displaced and destroyed to make room for settler people and cultures that have been valorized as morally superior. This discovery process is most visibly seen in Christopher Columbus’ discovery of the New World. The perspective of the Spanish settler was so emphasized that because he thought he was sailing for India the individuals he met were called Indians, even though they bore no relation to the Indians of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

The displacement of indigenous people from their lands is perhaps the most psychologically violent aspect of settler colonial violence. It is not that the land your forefathers is no longer fit to be habitable to life, it is that is no longer so for you in particular. It is, however, perfectly habitable for the settlers. Displacement sometimes involves the removal of people to a particular area or the continual resignation of them to evermore restrictive parcels of land; other times displacement is merely a statement that indigenous people simply must no longer live here. Displacement is seen in many places. Most famously, perhaps, is the Trail of Tears where the Cherokee Nation and four other “civilized tribes” in southern America were relocated to

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of genocide research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> National Archives, “Native North Americans: What was early contact like between English colonists and Native Americans?” accessed December 6, 2023, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/native-north-americans/>.

Oklahoma.<sup>4</sup> Trekking countless miles and swamps and crossing frost-cruised mountains, many perished from exhaustion, diseases, and untreated wounds.<sup>5</sup>

Destruction under settler colonialism holds many parallels to genocide. Settler colonialism operates through a logic of elimination whereby all remnants of indigeneity must be reduced to nothingness. All instances of settler colonialism share this in common. Often, elimination occurs by breaking down indigenous lands and giving them to settlers, giving citizenship to settlers and later denying it to indigenous peoples, and imposing settler religions and belief systems on indigenous peoples, among other structures erected with the singular purpose of eliminating indigenous people and culture while engraining those of the settlers.<sup>6</sup> One of the most prolific instances of this is found in boarding schools' attempts to train and civilize indigenous groups. The Carlisle Indian School changed names, religions, languages, haircuts, clothes, and ways of life of indigenous groups in an attempt to assimilate them into Western culture.<sup>7</sup> This amounted to an eradication of indigenous culture, even within individuals.

Denial is perhaps the most sinister of all the stages of settler colonialism. It is the active disavowal and refusal to acknowledge that settler colonization ever occurred. In this act of denial lies a silent admission of guilt. The whole process is so horrific that a conscious and honest admission of guilt is too great a burden to bear. So, the process is buried. Erased from history books. Justified by religious creeds. Anything but a naked acknowledgment of the truth.

Brief ethnic history of China

### **Tibet**

One instance of China's settler colonial behaviors may be seen through its occupation of Tibet. China first invaded Tibet in 1950 and then later annexed it.<sup>8</sup> In 1951, China signed a treaty, called the Seventeen-Point Agreement, with Tibet to recognize the Tibetan cultural and political sovereignty and independence from China.<sup>9</sup> Soon, Chinese citizens moved to Tibet and became more and more involved and integrated into Tibetan culture. They disseminated Chinese ideas, beliefs, and practices to Tibetan individuals, even sharing with them that clapping was a sign of welcome.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Chinese officials gave silver coins to everyday people in Tibet to garner trust and good relations.<sup>11</sup> In 1956, China opened a school in the Sakya region of Tibet

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<sup>4</sup> Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 387-409.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 387-409.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Carnegie Council, "When the Chinese Came to Tibet," accessed December 6, 2023, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/media/series/100-for-100/when-the-chinese-came-to-tibet>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Carole McGranahan, "Chinese settler colonialism: empire and life in the Tibetan borderlands," *Frontier Tibet* (2019): 517-540.

intended to train a new generation of political leaders.<sup>12</sup> In these schools, it was Chinese culture and beliefs that were taught, not traditional Tibetan culture. Then, the Chinese schools began suggesting that the traditional Tibetan schools be merged with the new Chinese ones, and many complied.<sup>13</sup> In these schools, as it would soon be known, the Chinese began teaching the young how to be early Marxist revolutionaries who would create a peaceful revolution and overthrow the Tibetan government under the guise of spreading modern, industrial ideas.<sup>14</sup> Tibetans were also invited to travel to China to observe their factories and societies.<sup>15</sup> The vast majority of this sharing of culture was directed at the ruling classes of Tibet and the children of all classes.<sup>16</sup> The Chinese government also began the extensive construction of strategic roads and infrastructure in Tibet that would become vital to the conquest of Tibet under the guise of industrial modernization.<sup>17</sup> The indoctrination and persuasion of the Tibetan masses were so deeply ingrained that when the People's Liberation Army first entered the Tibetan borders, they were assisted by Khampas, despite their strong ties to the Dalai Lama.<sup>18</sup> As regions were successfully "liberated" by the PLA, local and high lamas (religious leaders) were detained and charged with treason against China.<sup>19</sup> High lamas were asked to attend education programs that were soon to be known as Chinese reeducation camps.<sup>20</sup> Ordinary members of the upper class were likewise arrested for treason, save two families.<sup>21</sup> The Chinese soon forced Tibetans to attend re-education programs where religious leaders were routinely beaten and humiliated as well as forcing those same leaders to deface Tibetan religious artifacts.<sup>22</sup> They were taught to despise their religion. Private worship was also strongly discouraged. Private life also became heavily conscripted by governing authorities.

Today, it is clear that Tibet was a settler colonial expansion of the Chinese empire. Art, literature, poetry, and songs that are traditionally Tibetan, if shared, risk a state response by the People's Republic of China.<sup>23</sup> The use of the Tibetan language is itself seen as an act of resistance to the settler state's presence in Tibet.<sup>24</sup> There are, however, forms of resistance that the Tibetan

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<sup>12</sup> Carnegie Council, "When the Chinese Came to Tibet."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Carnegie Council, "When the Chinese Came to Tibet."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> McGranahan, "Chinese settler colonialism: empire and life in the Tibetan borderlands," 517-540.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

people are performing to stand in opposition to the strong and concerted effort to eliminate all Tibetan culture. Beyond the spread of Tibetan art, literature, and language, the Tibetan people attempted to become unknowable to the PRC. This act of willful opacity is a means by which occupied people can exist in relative freedom from the settler colonial empire. For instance, in Kham, there is a community of nuns who exist in a perpetual state of motion by building structures in a confusing and disorienting manner in resistance to PRC mandates for easily understood building practices that align with their hegemonic demands.<sup>25</sup> They also, along with other Tibetans, attempt to disseminate the history of Tibet to their people in a way that the PRC does not support. This supports teaching Tibetan people's history as independent rather than dependent on Chinese culture. The images of the Tibetan monk, bandit, and freedom fighter are often used to this end.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, teaching history with Lhasa (the traditional Tibetan capital) as the focal point rather than Kham (a Tibetan borderland that is often the focus of the Chinese).<sup>27</sup> Despite these everyday acts of resistance, the elimination of Tibetan culture is still a violent reality. China, even today, is expanding boarding schools for children to inculcate them with the ideals of the Chinese Communist Party, much like the indigenous experience with Western boarding schools in the Americas.<sup>28</sup> Students in these schools are strictly forbidden from practicing their native religion.<sup>29</sup> These efforts have been so successful that only a meager 22% of Tibetan children do not live in these boarding schools.<sup>30</sup> The relocation of massive amounts of Han people into Tibet has also been a strategic attempt by the PRC to eliminate Tibetan culture.<sup>31</sup> -departure

### **Yunnan and Guizhou**

Chinese settler colonialism is also not a recent trend in Chinese history. Many view China as a relatively homogenous society without internal conflict but this is patently false. In the 1680s, following the anti-Qing rebellion, the emperor announced his intentions to relocate Han farmers from the interior of China to the southwestern portions of China (Yunnan and Guizhou).<sup>32</sup> These farmers were intended to capitalize on vast swathes of unproductive land and cultivate them to support more population growth.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, these farmers were granted tax incentives from the emperor to perform this labor and once those tax incentives ended, the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> McGranahan, "Chinese settler colonialism: empire and life in the Tibetan borderlands," 517-540.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Josh Rogin, "China is getting away with cultural genocide in Tibet," accessed December 6, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/01/china-tibet-identity-cultural-genocide/>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> John Herman, "From Land Reclamation to Land Grab: Settler Colonialism in Southwest China, 1680–1735," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 78, no. 1 (2018): 91-123.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

farmers were given ownership of the land.<sup>34</sup> These Han settlers were primarily sent to regions of the southwest that were most staunchly opposed to the Qing empire. They were also strongly encouraged to extract as much value as possible from the land as possible, even at the expense of future cultivation. This land acquisition of indigenous land is a hallmark feature of settler colonialism. The terrain, however, proved extremely difficult to cultivate due to the rugged landscape and steep slopes of the Himalayan Mountain range.<sup>35</sup> Non-Han, indigenous individuals, called *tusi*, were hand-selected by the Chinese empire to be “leaders” in the region in an attempt to better solidify the rule of the Qing empire.<sup>36</sup> The acceptance of these titles was seen as an act of submission in the eyes of the Qing leaders. The elevated status of the *Tusi* was accompanied by preferential treatment by the empire, the promise of military support if an uprising were to occur, and favorable access to Chinese markets.<sup>37</sup> In the following years of the settlement of the Yunnan and Guizhou regions, there were soon instituted conditions for becoming eligible for imperial positions. Individuals had to be educated in Han schools and pass a literacy test.<sup>38</sup> This was a concerted effort to elevate only those members of society who were willing to submit to the hegemonic Qing empire’s customs. This process was not entirely as successful as it was intended to be because many of the Han settlers, once the tax incentives subsided, left the region and farmland to avoid paying taxes.<sup>39</sup> The solution to this was to militarily occupy the southwest. The Qing Empire ordered its military to occupy the region permanently.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, those in the southwest who were found to be loyal to the revolution were ordered to be killed.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, many of the *tusi* were found to be harboring and protecting fugitives who had supported the uprising.<sup>42</sup>

This historic instance of land acquisition in Chinese history shares many similarities with traditional theories of settler colonialism. It relocated mass amounts of non-indigenous Han people to the southwestern portions of what is now China and granted those settlers ownership of land. It eliminated many individuals who resisted this process. However, this event in the Qing empire did not make as great of an attempts at exterminating the cultural practices of the Yunnan and Guizhou people. It also did not attempt to relocate them to other areas.

### **Taiwan**

The settler colonialism practiced by the Qing Empire did not end once they were usurped by the Chinese Communist Party. Rather, in their dying throws they are engaging today in yet

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Herman, "From Land Reclamation to Land Grab: Settler Colonialism in Southwest China, 1680–1735," 91-123.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

another form of settler colonial expansion in Taiwan. The colonization of Taiwan has been occurring since the seventeenth century by several nations beginning with the Dutch and ending with Qing China in the present day.<sup>43</sup> Chinese nationals have been consistently moving to Taiwan gradually displacing the indigenous populations named shoufan (crooked savages) on the plains of Taiwan and shengfan (raw savages) in the high mountainous regions.<sup>44</sup> There was, however, a brief period of Japanese occupation from 1895 until the end of WWII following China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>45</sup> Following Japan's defeat in WWII, the island returned to Chinese hands. Following the Kuomintang (KMT) regime's defeat by the Chinese Communist Party, they fled to Taiwan as "true Chinese" bent on establishing a true Chinese state.<sup>46</sup> They renamed indigenous populations yet again as shandi tongbao (mountain compatriots).<sup>47</sup> The KMT rewrote and disseminated the rewriting of history to teach indigenous populations that they were fellow Chinese citizens rather than a distinct Taiwanese group. They explained the differences between the KMT and indigenous groups by alleging that the indigenous groups simply fled mainland China long before the KMT arrived "home" in Taiwan.<sup>48</sup> Despite the majority of ethnographical data pointing to the Malay Archipelago as the origin of the indigenous Taiwanese populations, these rewritings of history continue to claim that they were also a product of mainland China.<sup>49</sup> Most of the historical proofs they used to substantiate these claims originated from Qing dynasty texts that were heavily biased like the Fengshan Xianzhi and Taiwan Fuzhi.<sup>50</sup> They cited historical similarities like wooden clappers to call people together, worshipping dogs, chipping teeth intentionally, hanging coffins over cliffs, customarily clean-shaven men, moving houses following a family member's death, the status and value associated with items dyed blue, bows and arrows constructed of bamboo, and the "swallowing mouth" seen in many sculptures.<sup>51</sup> This rescripting of Taiwanese indigenous populations as originating from mainland China served the purpose of justifying the settler colonial practices that the KMT and Qing dynasties enacted. It is not the erasure and belittling of indigenous culture, it is rather reuniting it with its originator. Furthermore, recent scholarly endeavors indicate that there is a high probability that indigenous Taiwanese populations

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<sup>43</sup> Tomonori Sugimoto, "'Settler colonial incorporation and inheritance: historical sciences, indigeneity, and settler narratives in post-WWII Taiwan,'" *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 3 (2018): 283-297.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Tomonori Sugimoto, "'Settler colonial incorporation and inheritance: historical sciences, indigeneity, and settler narratives in post-WWII Taiwan,'" 283-297.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



originate from Austronesia and Indochina with a very low probability that they are from mainland China.<sup>52</sup>

There are, however, recent developments in the settler colonial experience in Taiwan. There is a growing movement to locate the national identity of the inhabitants of Taiwan with Taiwan itself, rather than with mainland China. This is an effort to push for greater levels of independence from the PRC. In 2000, the first president of Taiwan was elected who was not associated with the KMT.<sup>53</sup> This was followed by expanded rights and recognition of indigenous people in Taiwan.<sup>54</sup> Patrick Wolfe's statement that settler colonialism is stronger than regime change is particularly relevant in this period of Taiwanese history. Around this period, there became a wave of scientific experiments and studies that claimed that the inhabitants of Taiwan had a distinct DNA sequence that distinguished them from their Chinese counterparts.<sup>55</sup> This definition of indigeneity as explained by blood mirrors the one-drop rule that was used in the colonization of the Americas. It ignores the importance of non-biological foundations of indigeneity like cultural practices. Soon, however, holes were found in these studies. For instance, many Han individuals shared the "indigenous genes" while 15% of Taiwanese indigenous people did not have those genes.<sup>56</sup>

### **Uyghur Muslims**

Perhaps the most visible expression of China's settler colonialism can be seen in the mass incarceration of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. Uyghur Muslims are indigenous to the region. Over the rapid settling of the region, the Han population of Xinjiang rose dramatically which resulted in the population of Uyghur falling from 74.7% of the population to 46.1%.<sup>57</sup> the territory is referred to as an "autonomous region" but it is in reality under strict control by the Chinese Communist Party. Much like the Qing practice of appointing *tusi*, the CCP has appointed local "leaders" in the region to enforce the state's rules.<sup>58</sup> However, the region is largely governed by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps which are 90% Han.<sup>59</sup>

The dispossession of Uyghur land started in 1949. Before the CCP arrived, land was distributed in the traditional Islamic practice of land tenure where land was held by mosques or nobles.<sup>60</sup> The indigenous populations were largely pastoral. The land was "voluntarily" given up

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Tomonori Sugimoto, "'Settler colonial incorporation and inheritance: historical sciences, indigeneity, and settler narratives in post-WWII Taiwan,'" 283-297.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Qingchuan Gu, "Is China a Settler State? The Critique and Expansion of Settler Colonial Theory," (Masters Diss., University of Alabama, 2021), 1-81

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

and placed in the hands of Imams who were appointed by the Chinese Islamic Association.<sup>61</sup> Muslim faith leaders were sent to education camps to learn the proper way to practice Islam which included the hanging of portraits of Mao in mosques and preaching about working class solidarity.<sup>62</sup> Poor people, too, were placed in education camps.<sup>63</sup> The Hitlerian conditions of these camps are horrendous and often include forced labor. Cattle herders were also forced to exchange their cattle for more acceptable forms of agriculture.<sup>64</sup> Han people were also forced to relocate to the region. The Han population increased from an original 150,000 in 1954 to almost 1.5 million by 1966.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, marriages between Han men and Uyghur women are encouraged by the CCP. The offspring of these marriages and be classified as Han or Uyghur, but not both. additionally, once the child reaches 18 years of age, they can decide if they wish to remain whatever their parents classified them as. Overwhelmingly, people choose to be classified as Han which has resulted in a substantial reduction in the Uyghur population in reportings.<sup>66</sup> In response to the brutal settler colonialism, Uyghurs have engaged in peaceful protests, bombings, and knife attacks.<sup>67</sup> However, these momentary acts of resistance have only been used by the CCP as justification for their actions. They are not purging China of all non-Han ethnicities, rather they are tamping down violent religious extremists. This act of justification is strikingly similar to the way that the American Western states justified the violence they committed against indigenous populations by scripting them as “brutal savages.” Despite there being explicit protection of all minorities and their rights to freely practice their religion, the lack of state sincerity means that these provisions are merely parchment barriers that do little to protect the routine violation of the human rights of Uyghur Muslims.

### **Belt and Road Initiative**

There is perhaps a future of Chinese settler colonialism that can be found in their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This project is primarily focused on Africa but does influence in South America and other regions. Under the BRI, China seeks to reshape global trade in a more Sino-centric manner with itself becoming increasingly integrated into the rapidly emerging markets of Africa.<sup>68</sup> This project has most notably impacted Kenya, the Maldives, and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>69</sup> The BRI involves the CCP spending substantial resources on infrastructure development in underdeveloped countries. Many countries welcome this investment with open arms but the CCP

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Gu, "Is China a Settler State? The Critique and Expansion of Settler Colonial Theory," 1-81

<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Li Xing, China's Pursuit of the "One Belt One Road" Initiative: A New World Order with Chinese Characteristics?," *Mapping China's 'one belt one road' initiative* (2019): 1-27.

<sup>69</sup> Carolijn Van Noort, *China's communication of the Belt and Road Initiative: Silk Road and infrastructure narratives* (Routledge, 2021).

often stipulates that Chinese workers be the ones who do the construction and that those workers get full citizenship.<sup>70</sup> These Chinese nationals then sway the electorate in a given country to reflect the beliefs and practices of Chinese culture. Furthermore, this infrastructure is built on a loan and if a country cannot repay a loan, then the workers who build the infrastructure become the owners of the land.<sup>71</sup> This is a direct form of displacement.

The BRI is very new in its progress and much is still to unfold. One cannot help but note many similarities between the actions China is taking now and the early actions of other settler colonial states and even early experiences of Chinese settler colonialism. Citizenship rights for construction workers seem to be a more subtle means of displacing indigenous populations. The construction of infrastructure mirrors the European settler-colonial model as well as the Chinese experience in Tibet. While there has yet to be a concerted effort at elimination, it is a startlingly real possibility that must be considered in the future.

### **Conclusion**

China has a long and wandering history. Over the centuries it has risen to be one of the most powerful players on the international stage. Much of this rise has occurred because of the employment of settler colonial practices whereby a dominant racial group moves into a region inhabited by indigenous groups, dispossesses them of their land, replaces and eliminates the existing culture and peoples, and then acts as if the aforementioned process did not take place. Because no one of these elements is a singular event but rather points to a structure, the actions of China in Tibet, Yunnan, and Guizhou, Taiwan, against the Uyghur Muslims, and most recently with the Belt and Road Initiative, all illustrate strong examples of how China expanded its empire through processes of settler colonialism.

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<sup>70</sup> Gustavo Oliveira, Galen Murton, Alessandro Rippa, Tyler Harlan, Yang Yang, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Views from the ground,” *Political Geography* 82 (2020): 102-225.

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