

Testimony Submitted to Congressional-Executive Commission on China  
Representative Christopher H. Smith, Chair, and Senator Jeff Merkley, Cochair  
On behalf of the Committee for Cultural Policy, Inc. and Global Heritage Alliance

**Hearing: The Preservation of Memory: Combatting the CCP's Historical Revisionism and Erasure of Culture**

Thursday, December 5, 2024 - 10:30am - 12:30pm  
2360 Rayburn House Office Building

To the Congressional-Executive Commission on China:

The ongoing systematic destruction of Uyghur and Tibetan cultural heritage and the repression of Tibetan, Uyghur and other Muslim minority rights by the Chinese government represents one of the gravest humanitarian and cultural crises of our time. The United States must take immediate, decisive action to hold China accountable for its flagrant violations of human rights and international law. Below, we outline the key reasons why U.S. leadership is critical in this effort and propose actions to address the crisis.

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**The Destruction of Uyghur Cultural Heritage**

The destruction of Uyghur cultural sites is a cornerstone of China's strategy to erase Uyghur identity. Reports by credible organizations like the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) estimate that **65% of the mosques in Xinjiang—approximately 16,000—have been destroyed, damaged, or desecrated**. Shrines, cemeteries, and other sacred Islamic sites have also been razed or repurposed. Recent reports, including a November 2023 Financial Times investigation, reveal that the Chinese government's crackdown on Islamic architectural features has now spread across China, with **three-quarters of mosques with Islamic design destroyed or modified since 2018**.

These acts go beyond mere destruction of buildings. They are an attempt to dismantle the very essence of Uyghur cultural identity. The targeting of Uyghur sacred sites and traditional customs signals a broader campaign to replace indigenous beliefs and practices with state-approved narratives. In destroying cultural monuments, Beijing is actively erasing the physical and spiritual connections that bind the Uyghur people to their history and religion. As Maya Wang of Human Rights Watch aptly stated, "The Chinese government is not 'consolidating' mosques as it claims, but closing many down in violation of religious freedom." These actions reflect a calculated effort to "Han-ify" Uyghur culture and remove religion from public and private life.

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## **Human Rights Violations and Mass Detentions in Xinjiang**

The destruction of cultural heritage is part of a wider campaign of repression launched in 2014. Since then, the Chinese government has detained over **a million Uyghur and Kazakh citizens** in what it calls "re-education centers." However, survivors, leaked documents, and satellite imagery have exposed these facilities as concentration camps where detainees are subjected to:

- **Torture and inhumane treatment:** Physical and sexual abuse, starvation, sleep deprivation, and forced labor are common.
- **Forced renunciation of religion:** Detainees are forced to denounce Islam, memorize Communist Party ideology, and pledge loyalty to President Xi Jinping.
- **Sterilization and birth control campaigns:** Uyghur women are subjected to forced sterilization and coercive birth control policies in what many experts have labeled acts of genocide.
- **Cultural brainwashing:** Uyghurs are punished for speaking their language, practicing their religion, or celebrating their traditions.

These camps, along with China's broader policies, are systematically eliminating Uyghur identity. The mass incarceration of Uyghurs also extends to retroactive criminalization of previously lawful activities, such as teaching religion, owning books in the Uyghur language, or attending weddings and other gatherings with religious content. Over 200 leading Uyghur intellectuals, artists, and scholars, like Dr. Rahile Dawut, a world-renowned folklorist, have been "disappeared" or sentenced to life imprisonment.

## **Destruction of Tibetan Identity and Cultural Heritage**

China forcibly annexed Tibet in 1950 following an invasion, formalized through the coerced signing of the Seventeen Point Agreement in 1951. From the 1950s to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, an estimated 1.2 million Tibetans were killed, and nearly all of Tibet's 6,254 monasteries were destroyed. The Dalai Lama fled to India after the Lhasa Uprising in 1959. Tibetan monastic populations were reduced by 93%, and the Chinese government has since implemented systematic measures to suppress Tibetan religion, language, and culture.

### **Current Campaigns of Suppression:**

#### **1. Suppression of Religion:**

- Monks, nuns, and laypeople face persecution for practicing Tibetan Buddhism.
- Reincarnation of Buddhist leaders now requires state approval, effectively giving the Chinese government control over Tibetan religious traditions.

- The Panchen Lama, recognized by Tibetans in 1995, was kidnapped and replaced with a state-selected figure, who is largely rejected by the Tibetan people.
- Monasteries are required to display portraits of Chinese Communist leaders and use Mandarin translations of religious texts.
- Protests, including self-immolations, continue despite violent crackdowns.

## **2. Destruction of Religious Sites:**

- Major religious sites, including Larung Gar and other monasteries, have been demolished or drastically reduced in size.
- In Drago County, Buddhist statues and prayer wheel houses have been destroyed, with severe punishments for anyone opposing the destruction.

## **3. Reeducation and Monitoring:**

- Monks and nuns are forced into reeducation programs promoting loyalty to the Communist Party.
- Citizens are penalized for expressing religious beliefs, such as hanging prayer flags or participating in religious activities.

## **4. Forced Relocations and Surveillance:**

- Thousands of Tibetan families have been relocated to government housing far from monasteries, severing cultural and religious ties.
- DNA samples from large segments of the population, including children, have been collected under the guise of public security.
- Surveillance and repression extend to Tibetan communities abroad, with threats against families in Tibet used to silence criticism.

China's policies in Tibet represent a systematic effort to assimilate Tibetan culture into the Han majority, violating human rights and international agreements on cultural preservation and religious freedom. Critics argue that Tibet's cultural and religious heritage can only be preserved through global support and resistance to these oppressive measures.

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## **Targeting Women, Children, and Families in Xinjiang and Tibet**

China's repression disproportionately targets the most vulnerable: women, children, and families. Uyghur women are often arrested for minor or nonexistent "offenses," such as teaching children to pray or wearing traditional clothing. Children are separated from their families and placed in state-run orphanages and boarding schools, where they are indoctrinated with Communist Party ideology and stripped of their cultural and religious identities.

At least **880,000 Uyghur children** are now in such institutions, according to the U.S. State Department. Tibetan-language schools have been shut down, and approximately **1 million Tibetan children are forcibly placed in boarding schools far from their families**, where they are forbidden to speak Tibetan. The United Nations condemned this system in 2023, highlighting its role in cultural assimilation and linguistic erasure.

This deliberate destruction of family structures ensures that future generations of Uyghurs grow up disconnected from their heritage. Meanwhile, Uyghur activists abroad often face retaliation through the persecution of their families back home. This tactic silences dissent and demonstrates the reach of Beijing's authoritarian policies.

### **NY District Attorney Goes Beyond the US's Shameful Cultural Heritage MOU with China to Return Tibetan Artifacts to PRC**

The New York District Attorney's Office Anti-Trafficking Unit (ATU) recently returned 38 cultural artifacts, including Tibetan Buddhist objects, to the People's Republic of China (PRC). These items, said to date to the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, included bronze dorjes, ivory carvings, wooden sculptures, and mural fragments. The return, orchestrated by Assistant DA Matthew Bogdanos, occurred in a ceremony at the Chinese Consulate in New York and was celebrated in the Chinese press as a diplomatic success.

The return has drawn significant criticism, particularly from Tibetan leaders and cultural advocates. Lama Wangchuk Gyaltsen of Santa Fe, NM expressed outrage, highlighting China's historical repression of Tibetan culture, including the destruction of monasteries during the Cultural Revolution and current policies that suppress Tibetan religious and cultural expression. He argued that Tibetan artifacts should not be returned to the PRC but safeguarded until they can be preserved in a free Tibet.

The action was purportedly justified under the U.S.-China Memorandum of Agreement (MOU) regarding cultural property. However, this MOU, which acknowledges the PRC's claim over artifacts of minority cultures like Tibetans and Uyghurs, contrasts sharply with U.S. policies that condemn China's human rights abuses in Tibet. Critics argue the return of these artifacts undermines U.S. commitments to human rights and cultural preservation. The Dalai Lama has long advocated for the preservation of Tibetan culture outside of China, stressing its significance for global peace and understanding. Tibetan cultural heritage, including artifacts, has been safely maintained in U.S. museums and private collections. Advocates call for these items to remain in such safe havens rather than being repatriated to a regime accused of systematically erasing Tibetan culture.

The controversy highlights tensions between diplomatic agreements and the ethical obligation to protect the heritage of oppressed peoples. It also underscores the need for the U.S. to balance cultural repatriation policies with its commitments to human rights and the preservation of minority cultures.

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### **U.S. Responsibility and Leadership**

The United States has long been a global advocate for human rights and the protection of cultural heritage. The atrocities in Xinjiang test the credibility of America's commitment to these principles. If the U.S. does not lead the charge in holding China accountable, it signals to authoritarian regimes worldwide that such crimes can go unpunished.

#### **Why the U.S. Must Act:**

1. **Moral Obligation:** The scale and severity of China's actions meet the criteria for genocide under the Genocide Convention, which obligates signatories, including the U.S., to prevent and punish acts of genocide.
  2. **Global Security:** China's repression of Uyghurs, Tibetans, and other minorities is part of a broader authoritarian strategy that undermines international norms and threatens global stability.
  3. **Cultural Preservation:** The destruction of Uyghur and Tibetan heritage is an assault on global cultural diversity. Allowing these acts to continue without consequence sets a dangerous precedent for cultural cleansing elsewhere.
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### **Proposed Actions**

The U.S. must take a multi-faceted approach to address China's human rights abuses and the destruction of Uyghur and Tibetan cultural heritage. Below are actionable steps:

1. **End the U.S. - China MOU under the CPIA:**
  - China fails to meet the legal requirements outlined in the Cultural Property Implementation Act (CPIA) for establishing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to restrict the importation of cultural property. Notably, China has not fulfilled the obligation to demonstrate that it has “taken measures consistent with the Convention to protect its cultural patrimony.”
  - The U.S. State Department's recent renewal of a cultural heritage MOU with China under the CPIA is a deeply concerning decision. This action effectively endorses China's imposition of a singular cultural narrative and its harsh persecution of religious and cultural minorities.

- China's actions are in clear violation of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), as well as the UN Charter and the UNESCO Convention.
  - Upholding diplomatic relations does not necessitate abandoning core U.S. principles or entering into agreements that disregard the explicit requirements of the 1983 Cultural Property Implementation Act.
  - As the dominant global market for Chinese art and one of the most repressive authoritarian regimes in the world, China does not require U.S. assistance in controlling access to its cultural property.
- 2. Strengthen Sanctions:**
- Expand and enforce sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act to target Chinese officials and entities responsible for human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Tibet.
  - Impose penalties on companies complicit in forced labor or surveillance in Xinjiang.
- 3. Mobilize International Coalitions:**
- Lead efforts at the United Nations to hold China accountable, including calling for an independent investigation into crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and Tibet.
  - Collaborate with allies to create a coalition that pressures Beijing economically and diplomatically.
- 4. Protect Uyghur Diaspora Communities:**
- Grant asylum to Uyghur refugees fleeing persecution and protect Uyghur and Tibetan activists abroad from Chinese intimidation and harassment.
- 5. Support Uyghur and Tibetan Cultural Preservation:**
- Fund initiatives to document and preserve Uyghur and Tibetan culture, history, and language.
  - Partner with universities, NGOs, and museums to create archives of Uyghur cultural artifacts and oral histories.
- 6. Legislate Accountability:**
- Pass legislation like the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act and Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act to ensure no U.S. entities are complicit in China's abuses.
  - The U.S. Congress and Senate have condemned China's actions in Tibet, emphasizing support for Tibetans' rights to self-determination and cultural preservation. This pressure must continue.
- 7. Raise Awareness:**
- Support media, academic, and public campaigns that expose China's actions in Xinjiang and Tibet.

- Highlight the stories of survivors and victims to counter Beijing's propaganda.

#### **8. Encourage Multinational Accountability:**

- Pressure international organizations, such as the International Criminal Court, to investigate crimes against humanity in Xinjiang.
- Advocate for boycotts of international events in China, such as the Olympics, until significant human rights improvements are made.

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## **Conclusion**

The destruction of Uyghur and Tibetan cultural heritage and the ongoing human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Tibet represent an urgent crisis that demands a robust response from the United States. This is not just about protecting one ethnic group or one region—it is about defending universal principles of human dignity, religious freedom, and cultural diversity.

The U.S. must lead the global community in confronting China's authoritarian actions. This includes imposing meaningful consequences for crimes against humanity, supporting the Uyghur and Tibetan people in preserving their heritage, and ensuring that the world never forgets the atrocities being committed. The cost of inaction is too high. It risks emboldening China and other authoritarian regimes, undermining global human rights, and allowing an entire culture to be erased.

By taking decisive action, the United States can reaffirm its role as a global leader in the fight for justice and ensure that the Tibetan and Uyghur peoples do not stand alone in their struggle for survival and freedom.

Thank you for your attention to these issues of global importance.

Kate Fitz Gibbon

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