

## **An Explanation of *Fanghuiju*'s Attempt to Fuel Xinjiang's Community-Level Governance**

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### **Abstract**

*Fanghuiju* is a special 'soft' governance approach currently undertaken for local rural and urban communities by the Xinjiang authority. The overall goal of the *Fanghuiju* Project is to ensure that local cadres understand people's ways of life, to help improve people's well-being and win their hearts. Ideological and legal education, social stability, social assistance, development of local economies, and organization building are the main tasks and are fulfilled well to some extent. 'Being relatives' and bilingual education are two important auxiliary measures that play a vital role in the future of local people. While it needs some improvement, the *Fanghuiju* Project has highlighted its immense value by benefitting both the local residents and XUAR bureaucracy. Its value also shows better internal governance is far more important to Xinjiang's future than merely purging the influences of external forces and extremism.

**Keywords:** China, Community, Fanghuiju, Governance, Identity, Stability, Xinjiang.

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## Introduction

It is no secret that tensions and conflicts exist between Han Chinese and Uyghur people in Xinjiang (an area of northwest China). Terrorism, extremism, and separatism haunt the region, making it a focus of public attention. Accordingly, governing Xinjiang is a thorny issue for both central and local authorities. A carrot-and-stick approach is frequently used to deal with various problems in international and domestic affairs. In fact, there are two alternative approaches (and mixtures of each) to Xinjiang's governance. These are termed either 'hard' or 'soft' measures. This article intends to propose a 'soft' form of governance for the region alongside other 'harder' measures (such as the establishment of education and training centres).

A current Xinjiang governance policy is the implementation of a project called '[t]o understand people's lives, improve people's well-being, and win people's hearts' (*Fanghuiju* for short). It is replete with 'soft' elements and therefore worthy of analysis. However, outside of China, it is difficult to find serious studies or data on this project. For example, Joanne Smith Finley describes *Fanghuiju* as only being 'tasked with reporting "extremists" behaviours' (Finley, 2019: 3). Even in China, few outside Xinjiang are aware of the *Fanghuiju* Project. There are two reasons why it is high time that this initiative was promoted: create an overall regional image, and promote a proper understanding of Xinjiang's governmental process.

The article is structured as follows. First, the *Fanghuiju* campaign's fundamental narrative will be elucidated, including its background, motivation, development, and so on. Second, its achievements and shortcomings will be presented. Third, the project's future will be discussed. Lastly, the learnings from this campaign will be highlighted in relation to community-level governance. These are divergent problems, which the author will address from various perspectives.

This article is based on the author's field study, as well as on relevant literature produced mainly by scholars and authorities from Xinjiang. In contemporary China, so-called 'Xinjiang problems' have become somewhat sensitive issues. Therefore, conducting a field study on Xinjiang governance is not a simple task. In 2009, the 7-5

incidents occurred in Urumqi<sup>1</sup> (the capital of Xinjiang). Through much of the following decade, this region was not peaceful. Many heinous acts of terrorism, both large and small, took place prior to 2017. As a result, the feeling persists that Xinjiang is not a safe destination. However, some local officials allege that the region is the safest in China (and perhaps the world). This relative security is attributed to various governing measures. However, to avoid possible criticism, Xinjiang's local government does not intend to expose its governing policies to the outside world. Seemingly unavailable data (and potential risks to safety) may partially explain why the outside world does not have a full, accurate image of Xinjiang's governance.

Driven by the author's decade-long scholarly interests, no efforts were spared in conducting a field study in April 2019. In Beijing, data could be collected by speaking with relevant friends/subjects. Obviously, this background information helped increase this article's value. At the same time, there were some limitations to this study. The author's basic approach was examination and discussion, intended to enhance his understanding of Xinjiang governance. The author stayed in Xinjiang for a week, visiting four villages in South Xinjiang and three urban communities in Urumqi. Ethnic minority populations are overwhelming in these areas. But most interviewees were Han Chinese officials who were (or had been) engaged in the *Fanghuiju* Project. These participants came from government departments at autonomous regional/provincial levels. The remaining interviewees were civilians or local scholars. Once the discussions and examinations included two types of interviewees, it became difficult to determine the exact number of interviewees. The talks occurred either in groups around dinner tables or simply between the researcher and the subject. Around fifty people were interviewed. The author did not speak with local residents (i.e., villagers) because of insufficient mastery of the Uyghur language. The investigator assured participants that the study would not reveal their personal information. Interviewees understood and supported the author's intentions. It was evident that they wished to improve the region's quality of

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1. On 5 July 2009, a riot took place in Urumqi. According to the official narrative, 197 persons were killed and more than 1,700 were injured. It is described as the most serious incidence of violence in the city since 1949.

governance. Thus, the article's intent is to integrate the subjects' opinions with the author's understanding. In particular, the lack of discussions with minorities will focus this article on the Han Chinese's recognition of the project.

### **Background**

In recent times, Xinjiang has drawn a lot of attention and criticism from the international community, which stem from the establishment of education and training centres. Some observers say that these centres are government-operated internment camps, and thus part of a larger crackdown by Beijing's leadership (Liang, 2018, November 26). In addition, a report from the international Human Rights Watch describes the repression of Xinjiang Muslims as an attempt at 'eradicating ideological viruses' (Human Rights Watch, 2019, September 9). A key point is what has already occurred at these centres. Meanwhile, the long-term concern is the ethics of the centres themselves. Critics focus on the violation of human rights at the centres and demand that the centres be closed. Chinese authorities have had to fight these allegations. It is an absolute fact that these centres are government-operated. Yet, authorities deny that they are internment camps. Instead, they say that, as their name indicates, the centres serve roles in re-education and job skills training. The author neither entered one of the centres nor knows much about them (apart from the public information published by authorities). Despite the author's lack of personal experience, one might find that the centres may be a necessary measure for stabilizing the region (as will later be proven). To some extent, the author developed this idea from two particular documents: 1) the *Whitepaper of The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protections in Xinjiang* (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019, March 18), and 2) the *Whitepaper on Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang* (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019, August 16), which are both specifically tailored and issued by the Chinese government to counter the intense criticism and pressure exerted by the international community. However, the goal of the present article is not to defend the centres. As previously mentioned, it intends to

enhance various dimensions of Xinjiang's governance. The fundamental theme of this article is that the government is also taking 'soft' measures to restore Xinjiang's stability, which aim to support prosperity by fuelling community-level governance. Another important point is that, from the author's perspective, the government does not regard most Uyghurs as terrorists, extremists, or separatists in-waiting. Instead, it regards them as the masses whose support is indispensable to the legitimacy of the state and its effective governance.

### **A Brief Description of the *Fanghuiju* Project**

In February 2014, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) Party Committee (part of the Communist Party of China (CPC)) made a big decision. They opted to send approximately 70,000 cadres (from all levels of XUAR's bureaucracy) to stay in nearly all of Xinjiang's villages for each of the next three years. Their task was to experience the living conditions of the villagers. This project is intended to improve people's well-being and win their hearts. These cadres were also identified as civil servants, with the overall number of civil servants in Xinjiang reaching 220,000 or more. The XUAR Party Committee had planned to involve all civil servants in this project by the end of the third year. Other public employees (such as schoolteachers and doctors from public hospitals) were only marginally involved, because of the critical nature of their work at home. They only needed to intervene when higher authorities could not accomplish a designated task. Based on this decision, Xinjiang's whole party and the governmental system immediately sprung into action to select proper cadres to establish working groups for a village. In some operations, city communities were included. Obviously, villages in vast rural areas were targeted more frequently. Urban communities were selected if there were potential problems, particularly relating to ethnic minorities. If a community's residents were overwhelmingly Han Chinese, there was a high likelihood that a working group would not be deployed. The scale of the working groups differed according to village differences. For example, a working group of eight or more members would be assigned to a big village (about 3,000 villagers) and a group of four or five members to

a small village (about 1,000 villagers). Hotan Prefecture, Kashgar Prefecture, Aksu Prefecture, and Kezilesu Kirgiz Autonomous Prefecture are in South Xinjiang. They are regarded as Xinjiang's poorest districts. Therefore, they contain large rural populations. In these areas, XUAR attributes more importance to the work of *Fanghuiju*. By the end of 2017, the Uyghur population in the four previously mentioned prefectures totalled 9,192,644 people. This number accounted for 78.8 percent of Xinjiang's<sup>1</sup> Uyghur population. The vast majority of these Uyghurs live in villages. By extrapolating the project's intent, such as increasing the state's legitimacy, it is believed that these villages (where many Muslims live) will provide ideal environments for evaluating the project's effectiveness. The author was informed that, before the arrival of the working groups, it was difficult to meet a Han Chinese villager in South Xinjiang.

Selecting suitable cadres is a relatively deliberate process. Members of China's cadre organization possess high levels of commitment to specific policy doctrines. They are well-suited for the effective implementation of economic and social development policies (Rothstein, 2015:533). Following the XUAR Party Committee's decision, a leadership group was established, with the goal to conceive and set up a series of plans. The results were as follows: 1) one governmental department is designed to match each village of a certain size, while 2) one large department/organization with additional staff will cover two or more villages. This usually means that the members of a working group are from the same working unit. Such continuity facilitates management from above and the operation of tangible work. First, experienced senior cadres apply for participation in the project. They show resolve, courage, and a clean conscience, realizing that involvement in the project is a difficult task. Of course, they are selected first. The newer, junior members are not as reassuring, though some young cadre members may be chosen if their daily work proves to be excellent. Some factors (such as sexuality, age, language, and ethnicity) require consideration in group formation. The member with the highest rank is appointed the group's

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1. The author calculated this number based on the 2018 Xinjiang Statistic Yearbook. In Xinjiang, the total Uyghur population reached 11,655,000 in 2017.

leader. Each group needs at least two members who are fluent in both Chinese and Uyghur to guarantee effective communication with residents. Not all selected cadres are CPC members. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to infer that most are. Once selected, the leader must delegate responsibilities to the others to avoid being overwhelmed. It is worth noting that these cadre members appear first as volunteers, applying for participation. However, their involvement in the project (for as long as it continues) becomes essential to the organization. In turn, the project must encourage more cadres to volunteer. Once selected, these cadres would be given education and training, which might include basic information of the target village, some basic language tips for simple daily communication (e.g., Uyghur), as well as the content, instructions, and discipline of the work. With regard to professional skills, it is difficult to say whether a given cadre's talents are general or expert in nature. This depends upon a combination of the designated position and their personal talents. For instance, a cadre selected from the propaganda department might be good at drafting documents (and simultaneously include a certified lawyer). Nearly all government and party departments (above the town level) are involved in the project. Members come from various departments, including but not limited to the Statistic Bureau, the Development and Reform Commission, and the Education Bureau. The villages fall into three types: key villages (where 'problems' are 'serious and urgent'), common villages (where 'problems' are 'normal'), and excellent/reassuring villages (where 'problems' are 'neither serious nor urgent'). Cadres and working groups from the XUAR-level departments are dispatched to key villages. Cadres from prefecture-level departments are sent to common villages. Lastly, those from county-level departments are sent to the excellent villages. Most group members from the departments on the XUAR level are Han Chinese. One can infer that, at any given time, one-third of a dispatched unit's staff is sent to villages based on the XUAR bureaucracy's human resources.

By the end of 2016, the *Fanghuiju* Project had succeeded in its first round. This information was provided by several of Xinjiang's scholars, who also identified some problems with the project (Chen, 2015:57; Wang, 2017:31; and Yang, 2015:36). A total of 33,620

working groups, comprising 228,000 cadres, had been sent to villages and urban communities (Sun and Ma, 2018:158). In early 2017, the XUAR Party Committee decided to extend this project by another three years. A major change was that all cadres sent were required to stay in their villages for three whole years (rather than one year, as previously deployed). In early 2019, the XUAR Party Committee declared that it would step up all measures to normalize and institutionalize this project. According to the latest official statistic, since 2018 the XUAR has sent out 12,554 working groups with 77,923 cadres (Xinjiang Daily, 2019, April 27)<sup>1</sup>. By the beginning of 2020, the second batch of cadres will be selected for a three-year stay.

### **Five Main Working Group Tasks**

*Ideological and legal education is of primary importance.* For various reasons, many Xinjiang residents lack the sensibilities of a modern state. In other words, they neither realize that they belong to a state, nor do they understand that all people must be part of a state. Instead, they believe that Allah rules all things. This belief system can lead to conflicts with the state's rules. From the government's perspective, some extreme religious ideas have permeated the region and have a large influence on common people's daily lives. For example, many females now wear burkas<sup>2</sup>, and young people have even begun to grow long beards. This is unusual, representing a change from previous societal norms. Another fact is that many Xinjiang residents have little conception of the rule of law. Many marry or divorce outside of legal channels: namely, without applying for a marriage or divorce certificate. Many young people are not registered with their local government at birth because of their parents' lack of awareness. In response to these problems, working group members are asked to try every effective measure to correct residents' mindsets. For instance, groups must repeatedly tell residents that Xinjiang is part of an integrated China, that the CPC is the only ruling party, and that all must obey the laws of the state. Raising the national flag and singing

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1. Xinjiang Daily, 27 April 2019, Page A06. This page is full of pictures and charts showing various achievements in Xinjiang.

2. XUAR has listed 75 behaviours or actions that embody extreme religious ideas and asks society to buck these trends.



the national anthem are two typical measures used to increase populations' awareness of the state.

*The second major task is to help maintain social stability.* The working group must regularly pay visits to all houses, to ascertain basic information. This information includes the number of family members, their ages and occupations/activities, their economic and educational situations, and so on. Families having one or more members with a criminal record will be especially scrutinized. This task is closely linked to the third and fourth tasks.

*The third task is to provide social assistance to villages.* Usually, group members are glad to locate vulnerable village members. They seek to provide them with governmental benefits (or other social care) for their well-being. They also coordinate with other civil servants to complete certain measures, such as building kindergartens, improving village roads, or installing street lights.

*The fourth is to help develop local economies.* Group members must find a way to increase village members' incomes. Group members will help some villagers develop a courtyard economy through poultry-raising and by encouraging the rotation of cash crops.

*Finally, the group must help reinforce so-called organization building.* In every Chinese village, there are two indispensable organizations. The first is the village committee, an autonomous organization of villagers. The second is the village branch of the CPC, which comprises the village's core leadership. In contemporary China, the ability and capacity of these two organizations has long been weak. In South Xinjiang, it is even worse. Some village leaders exhibit corruption and unfairness in handling affairs and thus ignore the villagers' appeals. Some even align with terrorists, extremists, and separatists. This task requires the working group to help CPC's village branches recruit new CPC members. Further, it must enhance the political calibre and working capacities of villages' main leaders.

These five tasks are difficult, and each requires a great deal of work. The XUAR has created a set of regulations (and allocated a great deal of money) to guarantee the project's success. The regulations cover every aspect of the project, from the mechanism of selecting cadres to daily management. Group members must stay in the village, but they are allowed a ten-day home leave every three

months. With regard to support, the government provides 1) financial subsidies to each group member, 2) affordable infrastructure for the group's life and work needs, 3) special funds for employee-benefitting projects, and 4) trivial and tangible services. Generally speaking, special funds for community-oriented projects in each key village amount to 500,000 yuan (about US \$70,000<sup>1</sup>) per year. Meanwhile, funds for villagers' trivial and tangible services range from 100,000 yuan (about US \$14,000) to 150,000 yuan (about US\$ 21,000) per year (based on the village's type and size).

However, things do not always go as planned. In 2014, the first batch of cadres was pioneers, serving as explorers. Firstly, their main concern was paying attention to their own safety. They were often confronted by villagers' apathy and misunderstandings. According to the interviewees, some cadres even lost their lives because of various reasons such as disease, carbon dioxide poisoning when warming rooms in the winter, and even unsolved murders. In other words, the villages were not safe for group members (as indicated by the murders).

Notably, on 29 August 2016, Chen Quanguo succeeded Zhang Chunxian as the Secretary of the XUAR Party Committee, thus indicating (to some extent) a new stage in the *Fanghuiju* Project. Cheng stepped up every effort to eliminate terrorism. His policies stabilized the situation, which has further improved over time. The education and training centres were established sometime after 2016. Thereafter, the working groups were able to carry out their tasks confidently and boldly, without worrying about possible risks to their lives. However, the author's observations show that there is no direct relationship between the working groups and the centres.

### **The *Fanghuiju* Project in Urban Communities**

Not every urban community has an accredited *Fanghuiju* working group. Only key urban communities with high Uyghur populations are allocated working groups. In this sense, urban communities reflect rural ones ethnically and/or religiously. However, it is difficult to

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1. As of 30 September 2019, US \$ 1 amounted to RMB 7.14 yuan.

discern whether religious extremism is more prevalent in cities or in rural communities.

Working group operations in urban communities are similar to those in rural communities. Nonetheless, urban and rural communities have some fundamental characteristics that are notably different from each other. First, urban communities are usually regarded as small societies of strangers. In contrast, rural villages are societies of acquaintances. Generally speaking, urbanity implies mobility. In urban communities, there are always newcomers who stay for sojourns of indeterminate length. Thus, working group members must spend extra time vetting newcomers: who they are, where they are from, what they are doing (or want to do), and what help the working group can provide. Management of rental houses is a particular focus.

Secondly, organization-building is not as weak as it is in rural areas due to the importance of cities to the economic and social order. One specific factor affecting Xinjiang is the makeup of its urban community committees and party branches. All leaders and fulltime employees are staffed and, accordingly, financed by the state. This makes it easier for the working group to carry out the organization's building tasks. Conditions have improved, and the ability (as well as the capacity) of community organizations has now increased. Tension between deployed and local cadres is relatively low. The latter does not greatly envy the subsidies received by the former. On the contrary, the two sides cooperate smoothly.

Thirdly, in urban communities, it is easy for working groups to make decisions in the public interest. Based on China's fundamental economic institutions, urban residents do not own and manage plots of urban land. Meanwhile, village residents can autonomously manage a plot of land. In China's rural areas, peasants (farmers) do not own any land. Rather, they have long-term contracts for the duration of their lives<sup>1</sup>. Common usages of land are agriculture, horticulture, grazing, or private housing. When working group members want to utilize a certain piece of village land in the public interest, there are great

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1. According to the Land Management Law of the PRC (revised in 2019), the contract depends upon the type of land. Cultivated land could be contracted for 30 years and woodland from 30 to 70 years. Terms may be prolonged in due time.

tussles to persuade villagers to consent. In urban communities, working groups operate much more efficiently and autonomously.

Fourth, many urban communities have complicated spatial structures. For instance, their residential areas are formed and separated by courtyard walls. It is difficult to say whether this spatial morphology facilitates or hinders projects. At the very least, it requires more investments and resources (e.g., more security cameras and patrols) to maintain community stability.

Lastly, more (and better) human resources can be mobilized in urban areas to aid working groups in completing tasks. Clearly, most urban residents have a higher level of education. They also tend to have fixed work and lifestyles, including free time. Unlike villagers, urban residents more ardently 1) volunteer, 2) take part in patrols, 3) help the weak, and 4) visit targeted families with working group members.

Overall, the aims and operations of urban community projects are similar to those in rural communities, but urban characteristics imply greater ease in completing major tasks. In urban settings, it is easy to provide the needy with more job opportunities. Conversely, in rural settings it is difficult to help increase residents' overall income. In urban communities, most residents have a decent, full-time job. In such situations, the working group should mainly help newcomers and the poor. Economic and social aid is also linked to the effectiveness of ideological and legal education. In short, educational opportunities are greater in urban areas than in rural ones. In urban settings, there are different, more concrete ways of fulfilling the mission of improving education. More resources can be accessed. Each of these factors eventually leads to a better, safer community. In other words, it seems easier to carry out projects in urban communities than in rural villages. However, this is not the critical reason *Fanghuiju* is expected to have greater effects in rural villages than in urban communities. In urban communities, most newcomers are originally from Xinjiang's villages. Once they find city life difficult, they return to their home villages. Moreover, the vast majority of Uyghurs live on rural land. Thus, effectively governing and helping to develop rural villages is also critical to the governing and development of contemporary Xinjiang.

### **Two Key Auxiliary Measures of the *Fanghuiju* Project**

The *Fanghuiju* Project presents a picture of interactions between dispatched cadres and local residents. Nevertheless, these deployed cadres have a strong national identity; thus, it is difficult for local residents to regard these cadres as their 'own mates'. To further win residents' hearts, a policy called 'being relatives' was created and implemented in October 2016. The policy says that each member of the working group must become the 'relative' of an ethnic minority family. The policy aims to unite all ethnicities as a single family. Here, ethnic minority families are either much poorer than the rest of the village, or are confronted by certain difficulties. For example, an ethnic minority family may lack labourers, as one or more family members may be either fugitives or imprisoned<sup>1</sup>. To be 'relatives' means that the group members are instructed to exert all efforts to help targeted 'relatives'. They can do this by mobilizing various personal resources. Many group members use their own money to buy rice, flour, oil, and so on for their 'relatives'. This is a simple way to embody the essence of 'being relatives'. Another common behaviour is for group members to directly give the target family some money, so that they may spend this more freely and autonomously. In some cases, even the unit's remaining on-duty staff are dispatched to assume the role of 'relative' to a remote ethnic minority family. On such occasions, these Han Chinese relatives will stay with their target family for three or four days. During this time, they chat, get to know their family's living situations, and foster friendships. Moreover, they help with housework and farm work. Such visits typically happen three or four times per year. In this way, group members establish and develop close relationships with their target family. By doing so, they learn about the real-life challenges of village life. In return, these connections help facilitate the group's work. Another (unspoken) function played by 'relatives' from the dispatched unit is to cleverly check on their deployed colleagues' achievements in each village.

Another activity intertwined with the *Fanghuiju* Project is 'Supporting bilingual preschool education in South Xinjiang'.

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1. It is easy for working group members to learn this information by visiting each village family. The local authority will also inform group members of the village's fundamental situation.

Although this supportive education was launched in October 2016, its application has thus far been confined to South Xinjiang. XUAR believes that bilingual education for preschool children in this area is of special significance. Bilingual education typically means teaching more of the Chinese language to Uyghur children, and more of the Uyghur language to Chinese children. However, given the population imbalance, Chinese language learning is clearly overemphasized. The cadre serving as a teacher also teaches the Uyghur language to other deployed cadres. Consequently, they can communicate with residents. Moreover, the teacher cadre (also a dispatched cadre) lives with these other dispatched cadres. According to demands from the Party Committee and Government of XUAR, 3,000 cadres were chosen to implement the bilingual education project. Each was committed to a one-year term. The cadres supporting education were entitled to the same economic remunerations and political privileges<sup>1</sup> as the *Fanghuiju* working group members. All infrastructure (including the kindergarten and accommodation for the cadres) is provided by the government. This is because the lack of proficiency in a national common language (namely, Chinese) has limited children's educational and career prospects. However, in the past, relatively few teachers have stayed in South Xinjiang to teach pre-schoolers Chinese. As is well-known, instruction at this stage is vital for anyone to develop language skills. At the same time, the government was ignoring the general importance of preschool education such as developing better societal recognition and psychologically falling into a positive personal character. Many ethnic minority parents are quite pleased that their children are learning Chinese; they are delighted with the vast improvement in their children's language abilities. The establishment of village kindergartens not only sparks an aspiration in these parents to promote brighter futures for their children, but it also alleviates some of the parents' burden of care. The free and nutritious food supplied by kindergartens also provides families with a sense of well-being. It is self-evident that this preschool education has significant, long-term implications for Xinjiang's future. In fact,

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1. In these cases, 'political privilege' usually refers to more opportunities for promotion and various spiritual encouragements.

nearly every working group organizes evening classes for adult villagers to improve their Chinese language skills.

### **An Evaluation of the *Fanghuiju* Project's Effects**

For village communities, the *Fanghuiju* Project has clearly produced some direct benefits to local development and governance. Residents have truly benefitted from the project, in that village, roads have been hardened and are no longer dark at night, broken ditches and aqueducts have been repaired, and many villages have become cleaner. The working groups help deal with longstanding conflicts, including disputes over who among the poor should receive government welfare benefits.

Cultural life is richer than it was before. Apart from daily religious activities, villagers' cultural life largely consisted of their folk dances, music, and handicrafts. It is evident that most Xinjiang villagers have low literacy rates and little education, mainly because of their limited economic means. Comparatively, working group members have usually higher educational levels. They can teach residents the Chinese language and organize more cultural or public events (such as football matches among the young boys, and courtyard talks or activities among the women). They introduce and explain common information about the government and the CPC, including the laws. Certainly, villagers' normal religious activities and traditional cultural lives have not yet been impeded. In each of these ways, village cohesion has increased. When the villagers are attracted by all sorts of public cultural events, they increasingly lose interest in things that may involve religious extremism.

Through these methods, the decline in organization-building has been reversed. It becomes a matter of concern to the CPC when its community-level branches become weak and lax, as (by nature) the CPC relies upon concentration. Such backward trends do not happen only in Xinjiang. However, once they take hold, their impact can be more detrimental than in other regions. This is especially true in terms of stability and safety. To address this issue, the group re-establishes and strengthens a series of working institutions and mechanisms for running the party's organization. These methods cover how to cultivate new party members, how to determine when a party branch

members' meeting must be held, what responsibilities the secretary of a party branch should shoulder, and so on. The group also instructs and helps the members of village committees and village branch members of the party. They provide advice on how to implement their work, greatly uplifting the abilities and capacities of community-level organizations.

A stronger political identity is emerging. Not only does each group undertake difficult tasks, but they must also fulfil them seamlessly and deftly. This demands laborious effort and unselfish dedication to the villagers. However, from the group's performance it could be deemed that the villagers believed that the cadres were serving them. These relationships won the villagers' hearts. Friendships between cadres and villagers are forged and developed when daily interactions become commonplace. Time and again, the villagers tearfully see off a cadre at the end of his/her term. Many cadres say, with emotion, that the villagers are actually very simple and kind. Cadres also recognize that the villagers are very thankful when you serve them wholeheartedly.

Dispatched cadres are trained and approved. They are often tired because of the heavy work load, frequent inspections, and supervision. Yet, they believe that this project is worthwhile and provides enormous value to both residents and the state. Involvement in the project affords opportunities to learn about locals' real lives and form close bonds with them. Abilities, such as personal interaction, are enhanced, while traditional virtues such as honesty and diligence are fostered. More significantly, these cadres are representatives of the party and government. The people's acknowledgement of them is, to some extent, an acknowledgement of the state.

Nevertheless, several drawbacks are evident. Material aid is unduly stressed. On one hand, some villagers directly require tangible aid (such as money, milk, oil, and other necessities). On the other, some group members found it easy to test their performance by providing tangible aid. They used these forms of aid as internal benchmarks for managing their performance. After all, group members know that the dispatching unit and relevant supervisors are watching their achievements closely. Accordingly, they are enthusiastic in using various resources to achieve immediate results. Some working groups,



who come from strong governmental departments, can access these resources easily. Some villagers would complain about a working group if the members came from a weak department and thus could not gather enough resources.

Sometimes there are mismatches between a working group and what a particular village requires. Xinjiang is a vast area, and the villages vary greatly from one another. XUAR launched this project in a short span of time; thus, it was hard to allocate appropriate cadres to each village. For instance, some villages require more economic aid, but the designated cadres may not be proficient in economic work. Therefore, a cadre who is excellent in a specific governmental department may not be the best fit for the designated village.

Organization building in general has been a weak node. Compared to other tasks, organization building is the key node in the *Fanghuiju* Project's purpose. From the perspective of both the party and the government, each effort to rebuild an organization is ultimately intended to cultivate loyal and capable teams at a community level. Most importantly (as the village's key leaders), the village committee director and the party branch secretary should be trustworthy and reassuring. This role is crucial to both the government and villagers alike. The trust-building process takes time. The brevity of a cadre's term is one factor limiting organization building. Cadres are usually vital persons in finding and liaising with a village's potential proper leader. However, when a different cadre is sent to the village, they may find it challenging to develop a new friendship and understanding with the candidate. Additionally, some group members position village committee and party branch members to deal directly with village affairs. Such decisions impair long-term organization building.

New tensions sometimes arise between cadres and the local elites. This sort of tension consists of two facets. One is the difference in benefits granted to each of the two groups. All *Fanghuiju* working group members are granted a subsidy that varies on the basis of location<sup>1</sup>. A member may receive a higher subsidy in South Xinjiang

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1. Interviewees did not give the exact amounts of their subsidies. It is reasonable to estimate that each deployed cadre received an average of about 1,800 yuan per month, since most members are senior. There is no clear data showing the amount of remuneration to local

than they would in North Xinjiang. Local elites, including members of village committees and party branches, are also granted some money as remuneration. These funds can be deemed their 'salary'. The problem is that the *Fanghuiju* working group members' subsidy may seem slightly higher than the remuneration of local elites. They may then begrudge the group members' higher pay since they work for the same residents in the same village. Another issue is emotional resistance. Some local elites think the dispatched cadres are unfamiliar with the villages, while some dispatched cadres might find the local elites weak in dealing with various affairs. Certainly, neither of these two types of tension is serious.

*Fanghuiju* has exerted some additional negative effects on the dispatching units. Under the *Fanghuiju* Project framework, each unit must dispatch some cadres to the designated village(s). Excellent cadres are picked first, burdening the remaining unit members. Much work within the dispatching unit was (and is) handled indelicately. Meanwhile, a three-year term in the village (as in the first round of the *Fanghuiju* Project) presents a big challenge to selected cadres. A one-year term could perhaps be managed through compromise. In contrast, a three-year term means (to some degree) distancing oneself from both the dispatching unit and old colleagues. Many group members worry not only about missing professional opportunities but also about suffering from long separations from their families. These consequences are inevitable when such a situation lasts for a protracted length of time. Tremendous psychological pressure will surely affect the dispatched cadres, their dependents, and (eventually) the rest of the dispatching unit. In the author's view, it is necessary for the *Fanghuiju* Project to continue for a long time. The project is pushing the party and government cadres<sup>1</sup> to the front lines of social governance and asking them to interact amicably with residents. Their presence in the villages is filling a national power vacuum.

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village cadres. Local village cadres with different positions and tasks receive different remunerations. It is reasonable to estimate an average of about 1,500 yuan per month.

1. 'Party and government cadre' is a vague name for the majority of staff working in the party and government systems. Usually, one is a cadre if one's salary is financed by the state. A cadre in the government could also be called a party's cadre if they have an identity linked to party membership.

Essentially, they are making up for past debts that the Party and the government owe to the local residents. Therefore, these drawbacks should never become an excuse for cancelling the whole project. This will be addressed extensively later in the article.

### **The *Fanghuiju* Project's Prospects**

Given the significant value that the *Fanghuiju* Project has demonstrated, the XUAR confirms that it must continue. As the Chinese saying goes, 'an arrow shot from the bow stands no chance of returning to the quiver'. Most of my interviewees believe that no one dares cancel or repeal this project, as no one would want to shoulder the responsibility for what might happen, such as more incidents of terrorism. The need for the programme's continuing existence is linked closely to the needs of local development and governance. Cultivating trustworthy and competent local community leaders, improving the Chinese language ability of villagers, and eliminating religious extremism have become the project's innate goals, all of which need more time to come to fruition. Furthermore, a lengthy, small-group sojourn with a Han Chinese majority creates more direct daily interactions with ethnic minorities. The *Fanghuiju* Project has shown that the Xinjiang authorities have correctly assessed the errors and deficiencies of previous work. The scale of the *Fanghuiju* Project (and its various inputs) indicates that the XUAR is taking the programme seriously this time, and hopes never to fall short of success for want of a final effort. Nevertheless, for sustainability, it is necessary that the *Fanghuiju* Project initiate some improvements. However, how to improve this project is a thorny issue afflicting both the working group and the organizer of the entire project (the XUAR). The following are three suggestions collected from interviewees and refined based on the author's understanding.

First, it is urgent to recruit a large contingent of high-calibre cadres from both inside and outside Xinjiang. These new members would supplement and optimize Xinjiang's cadres. Historically, the central government has taken similar measures, such as calling young people and ex-soldiers to serve Xinjiang and make it prosper. This was especially true before 1978, when the reform and opening-up began. Presently, Xinjiang regularly recruits new cadres from both outside

and inside Xinjiang, maintaining the usual hierarchy. Compared to the *Fanghuiju* Project, however, the existing cadre scale could not meet the long-standing need. Consequently, a large gap still needs filling. The recruited cadres could undertake some fundamental tasks that a party and government department should provide. In the future, when they are more familiar with local economic and social situations, they could be dispatched to urban or rural communities. Everything depends on the institutional design, including the number of recruited cadres, the duration of their stay in Xinjiang, and their privileges. As an important political decision, it involves more than a simple yes or no. Rather, it requires political courage from the central leadership, since many people (including numerous cadres) are keen to leave Xinjiang.

Second, systematic governance reform is vital in consolidating the impact of *Fanghuiju*. Some reviewers say (and the author agrees) that the *Fanghuiju* Project is intertwined with upper reform. This reform should take place at the county level and above. Working group members work in the interest of villagers; however, there are issues with some bureaucrats in county departments. Seemingly, they are either indifferent, or merely good at passing the buck. There is often reproach and disappointment directed from villagers towards working groups and, ultimately, the whole government. Some policies are incoherent or conflicting, leading to misunderstandings with (and resistance from) villagers. In Xinjiang, such misunderstandings and resistance could lead to grievances and resentment, perhaps promoting separatist feeling among ethnic minorities.

Third, superior management is needed. As previously mentioned, working group members should meet villages' actual needs. This process requires careful selection of the right person. Obviously, this procedure is quite labour-intensive. Appropriate utilization of technological tools is another important aspect. With regard to the cadres dispatched to villages, some could be financed like their counterparts in urban communities. It is believed that this measure would foment villagers'<sup>1</sup> enthusiasm towards governance.

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1. The author's field study confirmed that many of China's other rural areas are exploring how to hire full-time, state-financed village leaders. However, innovative theories are

### **The Future of Community-level Governance in Xinjiang**

The goal of community-level governance is to allow communities to be vibrant, cohesive, and stable. However, this goal depends on multiple factors, including 1) the foundation of communities, 2) external environments, 3) preferred governmental styles, and 4) governance mechanisms. There is no doubt that community governments in Xinjiang prioritize stability. Unlike villages in most other provinces, Xinjiang's are seldom affected by market forces and social organizations. Xinjiang's local governance is largely dominated by the national government and will remain so long-term. The *Fanghuiju* Project reflects governmental efforts to ameliorate previously ignored community aspects. These include such factors as neglected village development and legal education. In other words, through *Fanghuiju*, the government is providing greater resources to and wielding influence over vast rural areas. These projects have been undertaken to restore citizens' acceptance of governance.

Nonetheless, it is not logical that the current stability be directly owed to *Fanghuiju*. The *Fanghuiju* Project has only carried out its essential function (i.e. garnering the villagers' appreciation) since 2016. Only a series of stability-related hard policies (including the establishment of education and training centres) can guarantee holistic stability in Xinjiang. Subsequently, these policies become the basis for the *Fanghuiju* Project's formal operations. In turn, *Fanghuiju* makes contributions to further stability.

A sustainable stability has not yet resulted from these coercion policies; rather, stability has been bolstered by endogenous elements, such as steady jobs or promising careers. It is widely believed that people will not immerse themselves in religious extremism if legitimate or decent professions are available. Unfortunately, such a situation would not arise rapidly. Thus, working in Xinjiang's traditional agriculture (especially in South Xinjiang) is likely to provide villagers with few future prospects. Lacking Chinese language ability creates a bottleneck, preventing nearly all villagers from interacting with the outside world. Transitioning to the modern world

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needed to explain why the state should cover their salaries when/if they are selected by the villagers.

is therefore extremely difficult. Reasonable movement is clearly necessary to access more career opportunities and the market economy.

Therefore, in the short term, a prosperous and stable village community will not arise simply due to the launch of the *Fanghuiju* Project. The path toward community governance will be quite rugged. In the rest of China, community governance is also difficult to achieve. However, the launch of *Fanghuiju* provides a promising future for Xinjiang's village governance. This project is funnelling more resources, tangible and intangible, to these villages. Most importantly, it is bringing state power back to Xinjiang's villages.

### **Some Reflections on Xinjiang Governance**

Compared to other Chinese regions, Xinjiang is undeveloped. Half of the population lives in rural areas, and rural governance is the crux of Xinjiang's governance. Xinjiang authorities have considered *Fanghuiju* an approach to stimulating village governance. Yet, in the long term, more profound problems are on the horizon. The state needs to deliberate and develop strategies accordingly.

Firstly, what is the relationship between rising ethnic consciousness and levels of economic and social development? The CPC believes that more ethnic minorities will eventually acknowledge the CPC and the national government, genuinely and ardently supporting the CPC's rule. This shift will occur when the people receive higher incomes, better social security, and more services (such as education). However, there have been several instances worldwide where the opposite effect has occurred. For instance, Catalonia (one of Spain's most developed regions) still demands independence. Another related issue is whether more and better education will reduce potential independence awareness. Perhaps it is important to receive a certain type of education. However, as history has repeatedly shown, many revolutionists (or at least their leaders) remain intelligentsias even after extensive ideological education. Thus, the ultimate effects of some *Fanghuiju* group measures in economic and social areas are uncertain.

Secondly, what does injustice lead to in Xinjiang? Defining justice can often be complicated. Nevertheless, most sociologists and political

scientists regard it as useful in social governance. Moreover, it is essential for social and economic development. One study is especially relevant. It found that, from 1985 to 2013, the absolute income gap between Xinjiang's urban and rural residents was still increasing. Meanwhile, the relative gap between the two groups first increased, and then declined. The highest rate was 3.74, in 2001. By 2013, it had declined to 2.73 (Milanbieke, 2015: 89). Another study revealed similar results over the ten-year period from 2008 to 2017. However, as the numbers have indicated in recent years, the relative income gap has wavered slightly, with a rate even higher than in 2013. The numbers in 2015, 2016, and 2017 were 2.79, 2.80, and 2.79, respectively. However, in 2014 it continued declining to 2.66 (Jiang, 2018: 66). The author's data retrieval shows that scholars rarely perform income gap analysis among different ethnicities. The present research shows that in 2014, the rate between the annual per capita net income of the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese was 0.48 (Dai, 2017: 19). However, it seems people perceive economic justice as worsening. Specifically, they are losing belief in a reasonable income gap (i.e., economic equality). When the gap between rich and poor widens, what will happen to social governance? Xinjiang has a particularly high probability of a significant income gap and income polarization because of its industrial and social structure. As many other places have shown, this gap would be exacerbated in the face of various 'developments'. Many Chinese become rich because of their leadership or advantages in the social pecking order. Conversely, many ethnic minority populations fall into poverty. Thus, it is possible and even easy for a common societal contradiction to escalate into powerful ethnic conflicts. A study has shown that ethnic violence in Xinjiang is positively associated with interethnic inequality (Cao et al. 2018: 122).

Thirdly, what will happen without macro governance reform? The launch of *Fanghuiju* represents a type of reform attempt at the community level. However, its success depends upon greater reform of the entire governing mechanism. Issues such as the rule of law and anti-corruption must be addressed if the *Fanghuiju* Project is to have real effects. Moreover, it will be difficult for the project to consolidate any of the effects it achieves. Currently, Xinjiang is stepping up all

measures to guarantee stability, rather than accelerate macro-governance reform. Some researchers (Zhu and Blachford, 2012: 730) asked why, even with dramatic economic growth and substantial government support, economic and social situations remain unfavourable for local ethnic populations. Economic, social, and cultural factors are discussed in relation to this central problem. However, political factors should never be ignored. Rather, the author finds them vital to this discussion.

Fourth, what if local leaders refused to update their governing methods from those appropriate to traditional agricultural societies? What if they do not undertake methods adapted to modern society? The former would mean that the local ruler wants residents attached to the land, making it easier for the ruler to maintain power. The latter implies that residents need not rely on the land, allowing for a society full of various possibilities and mobility, no matter which are economic or social. Given Xinjiang's current situation, maintaining a stable framework will strengthen the current leader's traditional, static method of governance. Many residents are unable to move about freely or travel autonomously because of regulations enacted for the sake of 'social safety'. It is believed that, relative to elsewhere in China, Xinjiang is more restricted in some ways. One constraint is of the right to freedom of movement, currently abridged in the name of maintaining social stability. As Thomas Cliff says, there are many social and structural restrictions on the spatial mobility of Xinjiang people (Cliff, 2012: 104). This is the case both within China and in relation to international travel. Meanwhile, there are preferential policies in place to entice people to move to Xinjiang. The underlining governing philosophy is problematic and requires improvement. Some regulations (such as limiting the right of people to move about freely) could be regarded as interim measures. These measures may have been implemented because many acts of terrorism took place between 2009 and 2016. Moreover, the security situation in the region remains tense and fragile (Soliev, 2018: 53). Perhaps it will be easy to cancel these regulations once security improves. However, the antiquated governing model is deep-seated in the minds of those in power, from the lowest levels to the highest positions. It is very hard to change this idea through governmental reform.



## Conclusion

The *Fanghuiju* Project benefits both residents and the XUAR bureaucracy. At the same time, it creates an opportunity for people to learn about Xinjiang governance. It is worth noting that the *Fanghuiju* Project is using a soft mechanism to return state power to rural areas. However, only after further adjustments can desirable improvements be achieved. The project also proves that the so-called Xinjiang problem is largely related to the performance of the cadres, or the government. It is necessary to correctly assess the weight of the different factors causing Xinjiang's problems. In the author's eyes, improving internal governance is far more important to Xinjiang's future than merely purging the influences of external forces and extremism.

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