

ARTICLE

## Racial Capitalism in an Ethnic Minority Border Region *Husbandry Development in Altay Prefecture, Xinjiang, China*

Yao Qu 

Department of Sociology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada  
Email: qu9@ualberta.ca

### Abstract

In the social, historical, and political context of Xi Jinping’s China, particular forms of racialization and racial capitalism have emerged in Altay Prefecture, the homeland of ethnic Kazakhs on China’s northwest border. This study examines the husbandry industry in Altay Prefecture to elucidate how Xi’s China has built a mode of racial capitalism through the management of Kazakh land, ethnicity, and culture. Within the framework of a case study, I employ document collection and participant observation methods to gather data that are then interpreted through critical policy analysis. The research shows that Kazakhs have been racialized based on their mobile pastoral traditions, enslaved in the “debt economy,” and exploited through husbandry policies and programs. The particular ways in which husbandry has been restructured and assimilated into Chinese industrial production chains exploit and reproduce the Kazakh-Han hierarchy and segregation. This close look at racial capitalism in Altay sheds light on the operations of Xi’s ecological civilization and war on poverty policies in an ethnic minority border region and discusses how they align with the broader geopolitics of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

**Keywords:** Racial Capitalism; Racialization; Ethnicity; Kazakhs; China; Xinjiang; Pastoralism; Husbandry

*[The] character of capitalism can only be understood in the social and historical context of its appearance.*

—Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (2000, p. 24)

### Introduction

This study examines the development of husbandry in Altay to elucidate how ethnic Kazakhs have been racialized and absorbed into a mode of racial capitalism. In studies of ethnic groups in China, few scholars have used the concepts of racialization and racial capitalism to examine the relationship between the management of ethnic minorities and economic development. This study aims to fill this gap by introducing the concepts of racialization and racial capitalism into the study of Chinese ethnic groups. This study also

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Hutchins Center for African and African American Research. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is unaltered and is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use or in order to create a derivative work.

contributes to the literature on racialization and racial capitalism by adding a perspective from China.

In Altay Prefecture, a restive ethnic minority region on China's northwest border (See Fig. 1), a particular mode of racial capitalism has emerged out of a particular conjuncture in Xi's China: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the ecological civilization and war on poverty campaigns. These initiatives are a response to the slowing in China's economic growth since the 2008 financial crisis (Schmidt 2009), which is also a strong signal of a looming crisis of overaccumulation (McNally 2009). Moreover, the economic slowdown threatened the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As Yuchao Zhu (2011) noted, since 1978, the Party's rule has relied primarily on the solid economic performance of the country. Therefore, after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, he implemented many campaigns and programs to strengthen his power and boost the CCP's legitimacy. Altay Prefecture is in the crosshairs of Xi's economic development initiatives while also being subject to a recent crackdown on Turkic Muslims in a colonial context. Drawing on the theoretical framework of racial capitalism, I examine husbandry development in Altay Prefecture to elucidate how the Chinese state has managed the land, ethnicity, and culture of the Kazakh people through Xi's ecological civilization and war on poverty campaigns in conjunction with the BRI in a colonial context.

## Context: Altay Kazakhs in the Crosshairs of Xi's Initiatives

### *Kazakhs in Altay Prefecture*

As one of the major pastoral Turkic Muslim groups in Central Asia, ethnic Kazakhs inhabit many countries across Eurasia. While the majority of Kazakhs live in Kazakhstan, some East Asian and Central Asian countries also have significant Kazakh populations.<sup>1</sup> For example, more than 1.5 million Kazakhs reside in China;<sup>2</sup> 0.8 million reside in Uzbekistan;<sup>3</sup> and thousands reside in Mongolia, Turkey, and Iran. In China, Kazakhs primarily inhabit the northern part of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, Altay Prefecture, and Tarbagatay Prefecture. As an ethnic minority region that borders Russia, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia, Altay Prefecture comprises one city and six counties: Altay City, Qinggil County, Burultogay County, Jeminay County, Kaba County,



**Figure 1.** Altay Prefecture in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China\\_Xinjiang\\_Ili.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_Xinjiang_Ili.svg).

Koktogay County, and Burqin County. As one of fifty-five state-recognized ethnic minorities in China, Kazakhs are alien to Han Chinese, the ethnic majority that is politically, culturally, and economically dominant in China in terms of culture, language, religion, and even physical features. This study uses the framework of racial capitalism to examine the rapid transition from pastoralism to sedentarism in Altay Prefecture. Kazakh pastoralism is based on mobile, kinship-based social organizations (Kaz. ауыл), in which the leaders (Kaz. бас) decide pasture ownership. In Altay Prefecture, pastoral Kazakhs migrate among summer (Kaz. жайлау), fall (Kaz. күзеу), winter (Kaz. қыстау), and spring pastures (Kaz. көктей). Kazakhs normally herd sheep, goats, horses, cattle, and camels; before 2000, sheep made up most of the Kazakh livestock in Altay Prefecture (Zhang 2004). In pastoralism, Kazakhs primarily interact with the local market by selling meat, dairy products, and wool. However, the development of husbandry based on herder sedentarization projects implemented by the Chinese state has dramatically changed Kazakh social organization, lifestyle, livestock composition, and land ownership and the relationship between Kazakh herders and the market. In sedentarism, Kazakhs have become anchored in government-built villages and must use modern technologies to raise livestock, guided by a capitalist logic; the products they make are sold nationwide and globally. This study elucidates how racial capitalism works in the Sino-Kazakh context by presenting the development of sedentary husbandry in Altay Prefecture.

### **Colonial Restructuring of Xinjiang**

When the CCP took over Xinjiang in 1949, more than ninety-one percent of the population were Muslims, and most were members of Turkic ethnic groups (Yuan 1990). In the Mao era, since Xinjiang lacked a real legitimate base for Chinese rule and had been plagued by anti-Han sentiment before 1949, the CCP patiently built up its rule in Xinjiang by relocating Han Chinese to the region while adopting relatively moderate policies (McMillen 1984; Yuan 1990). During that period, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) functioned as a paramilitary organization to institutionalize the immigration of Han settlers and to develop the economy and infrastructure (Clarke 2011).

Since China's marketization in 1978, the CCP has strived to extract Xinjiang's resources for economic growth. In 1999, Jiang Zemin, the president of China at the time, launched the Western Development, which ordered the relatively underdeveloped twelve provinces/regions in western China to extract economic value from their natural resources. The strategy demanded that the following changes occur in Xinjiang: development of hydraulic, energy, and transportation projects; utilization of the economic structure; prioritization of the economic development of northern regions; ecological protection; development of education and technology; and building of economic ties with Central Asia, West Asia, and Eastern Europe.

Rapid economic development in Xinjiang, however, has intensified ethnic minority discontent due to the economic inequality and exploitation present in the area (Bovingdon 2002; Finley 2013). Moreover, the identities, cultures, languages, and religions of ethnic minorities have been severely marginalized, further fueling ethnic minority discontent (Roberts 2020). As a result, ethnic conflicts occurred frequently in Xinjiang before 2017. For example, on July 5, 2009, a massive Uyghur-Han<sup>4</sup> conflict in Ürümqi resulted in at least 197 deaths.<sup>5</sup> In 2014, two critical incidents provided Xi Jinping with the security rationale to shift policies in Xinjiang. On March 1, a group killed thirty-one people and injured 141 at Kunming station, for which the Chinese government blamed Islamic extremists from Xinjiang.<sup>6</sup> On April 30, shortly after Xi Jinping's inspection tour in Xinjiang, a bomb and knife attack occurred at Ürümqi's southern railway station, resulting in three deaths and seventy-nine injuries.<sup>7</sup>

To handle ethnic minority unrest, Xi Jinping, unlike his predecessors, adopted radical measures to shift the region's social, political, economic, and cultural structures. The political and socioeconomic restructuring of Xinjiang in Xi's era features intensive securitization, ethnic assimilation, and neoliberalization. In response to this unrest, the CCP began to securitize Uyghur-concentrated southern Xinjiang in 2012 and then expanded securitization throughout Xinjiang in 2016, when Chen Quanguo—the former head of Tibet who specialized in mercilessly repressing ethnic minorities—became the Party secretary of Xinjiang (Zenz and Leibold, 2020). In 2017, large-scale internment camps were built across Xinjiang to massively detain Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Turkic Muslim minorities. In the camps, Turkic Muslims were forced to abandon “religious extremism” and embrace a “secular life” by accepting Chinese patriotic education and learning Mandarin (Zenz 2019). Securitization and assimilation policies have further undermined ethnic minority autonomy, thus facilitating capital accumulation in the region through the management of ethnic minorities. For example, some internment camps are directly linked to warehouse factories, where the detainees are forced to work.<sup>8</sup> Between 2017 and 2019, more than 80,000 Uyghurs were transferred out of Xinjiang to work as laborers in factories in inland China.<sup>9</sup> Through the lens of racial capitalism, this study aims to investigate how the management of land, ethnicity, and culture of the Kazakh people in Altay Prefecture creates value for capital accumulation in Xi's China.

### ***BRI and Altay Prefecture***

The BRI is a program introduced by Xi Jinping during his visit to Kazakhstan in 2013. Its central idea is to establish two economic belts: a land belt connecting China to Central Asia, West Asia, the Middle East, and Europe through Xinjiang and a maritime belt linking China's ports with the African coast and the Mediterranean Sea (Xing 2018). The BRI reflects China's ambitions to become not only a global mega-hub that uses world resources to fuel the Chinese economy but also a proactive global rule-setter (Xing 2018). The BRI also provides the Chinese state and capital with “spatial fixes” to address overaccumulation through geographical expansion and spatial reconfigurations (Zhang 2017). Xinjiang and Altay Prefecture play vital roles in the BRI: three of six economic corridors in the BRI cross Xinjiang,<sup>10</sup> and Altay Prefecture, the only region in Xinjiang that borders both Russia and Kazakhstan, is an important hub in the northern corridor of Xinjiang's Silk Road Economic Belt.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Altay Prefecture has four national-level type-1 land ports (Jeminay Port, Hongshanzui Port, Taykeshken Port, and Aghetubek Port) and the Jeminay national-level Border Economic Cooperation Zone, which aims to facilitate bilateral trade with Kazakhstan, Russia, and Mongolia.

The unique geographical location of Altay has rendered it a major target of the CCP. The recent, intensive restructuring of Altay's political economy reflected the CCP's determination to transform the region into a powerhouse for China's global capitalistic, imperial expansion through the BRI. In this context, husbandry development in Altay has been partially motivated by the BRI to rapidly restructure the local political economy through managing the land, ethnicity, and culture of the Kazakh people.

### ***Ecological Civilization and Kazakh Land Dispossession***

In Altay, Kazakh land dispossession justified by ecological civilization, along with the herder sedentarization project, can be seen as the commencement of racial capitalism through husbandry development. Ecological civilization, a term coined by the Soviet Union in 1984, has been adopted and significantly developed in China since 2007 (Gare

2012). The concept highlights the utopian harmony among humans, nature, and society to achieve sustainable development (Pan 2006). Ecological civilization first emerged at the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (NCCCP) in 2007.<sup>12</sup> Since then, ecological civilization has gradually become one of the five pillars of Xi Jinping Thought, along with economy, rule by law, strengthening the military, and diplomacy, which signifies its importance in China's national policies and practices in Xi's era.<sup>13</sup> In June 2011, guided by ecological civilization, the State Council of the People's Republic of China ordered local governments to demarcate and protect basic grasslands, which must constitute more than eighty percent of the total land.<sup>14</sup>

In response, in March 2013, the Altay government announced the Altay Prefecture Ecological Environmental Protection Regulations. The Regulations commanded subordinate governments to demarcate and protect basic grasslands; control herding times, intensity, and livestock numbers; actively implement herding prohibitions, halts, and rotations; execute herder sedentarization projects; and develop modern husbandry practices.<sup>15</sup> In Altay Prefecture, there are often extensive herding prohibitions in place. For example, in 2021, fifty-seven percent of the grasslands and forests in Altay City were enclosed in the name of ecological protection.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the Altay government has been targeting Kazakh herders via technology and security means. For example, in July 2018, the Altay Administrative Office announced the Management Measures on Herding Prohibitions and Grass–Livestock Balance Supervision in Altay Prefecture.<sup>17</sup> These measures require subordinate governments to collect all herders' information, supervise herding activities, establish security patrols, and punish violators. Moreover, in 2022, more than ninety percent of Kazakh herders in remote regions had access to 4G internet services provided by the China Mobile Altay Branch, and the herders were advised to use Chinese GPS services that involved inserting GPS chips into their sheep.<sup>18</sup> Through internet and GPS services, the Altay government can easily obtain the precise location of each herder at any time and send security forces to expel, fine, and arrest violators. As a result, 31,618 Kazakh pastoral households had been dispossessed and sedentarized through a herder sedentarization project in Altay Prefecture by the end of 2019, constituting 90.6% of pastoral Kazakh households registered in the region in 2008.<sup>19</sup> The Altay government adopted the narrative of ecological civilization to dispossess and sedentarize Kazakh herders to further absorb them into Chinese industrial production chains through a mode of racial capitalism.

### ***War on Poverty and the Management of Kazakhs***

For the Altay government, the adoption of Xi's war on poverty campaign provides a crucial justification for absorbing the dispossessed Kazakhs into Chinese industrial production chains. The war on poverty was a nationwide campaign launched by Xi Jinping on November 29, 2015, with the aim of closing the enormous income gap between mainland China's urban and rural regions.<sup>20</sup> The campaign ordered local governments to design and implement precise poverty reduction measures to alleviate the suffering of the seventy million individuals making up the destitute rural population, especially in the western and middle provinces and regions.<sup>21</sup> The war on poverty aimed to achieve the fundamental requirement of socialism, common prosperity (Chi. 共同富裕), an egalitarian socialist ideology dating back to 1953 (Dunford 2022). Xi Jinping regards common prosperity as part of the fundamental legitimacy of the Party's rule: the ideology, from the Party's perspective, can not only demonstrate the superiority of socialism with Chinese characteristics in comparison with Western capitalism but also ease Chinese people's discontent stemming from economic inequality (Liu et al., 2021).



The war on poverty campaign was adopted in Xinjiang and Altay Prefecture in February 2016.<sup>22</sup> The Xinjiang government ordered subordinate governments to use a modern information system to target 2.6 million impoverished people, identify their labor capabilities, and design precise measures (e.g., education, labor transfer, and ecological compensation) to elevate their economic status. The Altay government was ordered to reduce poverty in two poor counties (Qinggil and Jeminay), populated mainly by Kazakh herders, before 2017.<sup>23</sup> In practice, the campaign rationalized the CCP's management of Kazakhs in Chinese industrial production chains—a particular mode of racial capitalism in the conjuncture of China's multiple initiatives in one of its ethnic minority frontiers in Xi's era.

## Racial Capitalism in the Chinese Context

### *Neoliberalism in China*

Neoliberalism, a political-economic doctrine opposing active government intervention to secure private property arrangements, market institutions, and entrepreneurial activities (Harvey 2003), varies throughout space and time in terms of “the scale of scope of state intervention, forms of capital and labor market regulation, the constitution of institutions of social regulation, patterns of political resistance and political incorporation, and so forth” (Peck and Tickell, 2002, pp. 387–388). While neoliberalism in Latin America features deregulation, free trade, and privatization, which accord with the Washington Consensus mode, China has adopted a unique path of neoliberalism that oscillates between market-oriented practices and state-led intervention (Liverman and Vilas, 2006; So and Chu, 2012). In the Chinese mode of neoliberalism, the CCP has used strong state machinery to actively and proactively intervene in the market economy in a nationalist authoritarian context (So and Chu, 2012). Moreover, the Chinese Party-state has increasingly encroached upon the private sector by inserting Party cells into private and foreign businesses, increasing state shareholding, and extending the reach of industrial policy, motivated by a logic of political survival (Pearson et al., 2021). In Xinjiang, the Chinese state has built a special form of capitalism—terror capitalism, which develops new products and forms of labor through land grabbing, cultural genocide, and the restructuring of livelihoods—to use against indigenous groups (e.g., Uyghurs and Kazakhs) (Byler 2018). In this study, I examine how China, in Xi's era, has built a particular mode of racial capitalism through the management of the land, ethnicity, and culture of the Kazakh people in Altay Prefecture.

### *Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in the Chinese Context*

Race and ethnicity are both discursive constructs that operate through the making of meaningful distinctions (Hall 2017). While the concept of race emphasizes physical differences in bodies as privileged signifiers, the concept of ethnicity highlights cultural differences (e.g., languages, traditions, religious beliefs, customs, and rituals) (Hall 2017). Through cultural distinctions of race, ethnicity, history, gender, sexuality, and social class, nationality is constructed to produce meaning and allow identification within and across human groups (Hall 2017). In the Chinese context, the term *minzu* (Chi. 民族) is used interchangeably for nation, nationality, ethnicity, and race (Chu 2018). The term *zhonghua minzu* (Chi. 中华民族) was coined to create a united Chinese nationality across cultural differences, whereas the term *shaoshu minzu* (Chi. 少数民族) is used to manage cultural distinctions (Chu 2018). *Shaoshu minzu* implies the dominant role of Han Chinese as an “elder brother” in economic and cultural areas to set an example for other ethnic groups (Barabantseva 2008). In this study, I treat Kazakhs and Han Chinese as discursive constructs based on cultural differences, and Kazakhs are racialized by Chinese institutions,

market forces, and Han Chinese, thus extending racialization beyond the Black and White categories (Gonzalez-Sobrinio and Goss, 2019).

### **Racialization in the Chinese Context**

Since the concept of race is static, empty, and unreal (Gravlee 2009; Rustin 2000), the term racialization has been coined and used to emphasize the *process* through which racialized groups are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed (Barot and Bird, 2001; Gans 2017; Hochman 2019). In racialization, the construction of racialized groups can be based on skin color, religion, language, place, and cultural practices (Garner and Selod, 2015; Inwood and Yarbrough, 2010; Lassiter et al., 2002; Leeman 2004; Vidal-Ortiz 2004). In the Chinese context, racialization can be built upon places, mannerisms, and household registration (Ang 2018; Han 2010; Lowe and Tsang, 2017). For example, in Singapore, newly arrived Chinese migrants are racialized by other ethnic Chinese based on place differences (Ang 2018). In mainland China, rural migrants are racialized through hukou, a household registration system that unequally distributes health care benefits, education opportunities, and employment rights based on regional differences (Han 2010; Liu 2005). In China, while regional differences play vital roles in racialization, ethnic differences are also used to racialize ethnic minorities in particular ways. For example, in Xinjiang, Turkic Muslims (e.g., Kazakhs and Uyghurs) are racialized as “terrorists” and “extremists” based on their religion and ethnicities (Brophy 2019; Byler 2021), which resonates with the racialization of Muslim Americans after 9/11 (Selod 2015). In this study, I examine the racialization of Kazakhs based on a combination of place, ethnicity, and cultural practices to enrich our understanding of racialization in the Chinese context.

### **Racial Capitalism Beyond the Black-White Binary**

Since capital can accumulate only through unequal relations among human groups (Melamed 2015), race and ethnicity, two basic units of human differentiation, are intrinsically involved in the process of capital accumulation. Built upon European civilization, the development of capitalism, since its very beginnings, has included “racial, tribal, linguistic, and regional particularities” (Robinson 2000, p. 10). Racial inequality is not a consequence of uneven development but rather a central component of capital accumulation (Dantzer 2021). To describe the racist nature of capitalism, the term “racial capitalism” was coined (Leong 2013; Melamed 2015; Robinson 2000). In racial capitalism, capital accumulation is achieved through the making of the racial Other to facilitate expropriation and exploitation (Leong 2013; Melamed 2015).

Racial capitalism can also be used beyond the Black-White binary to explain accumulation through the *making* of ethnic, cultural, and caste differences (Byler 2021; Gupta 2022), since the central idea of the concept is value making through human differentiation (Melamed 2015). In non-Euro-American contexts, caste and ethnicity can be racialized by social institutions and market forces (Byler 2021; Gupta 2022). For example, in India, the caste system under neoliberal reforms functions as racial categories to achieve capital accumulation (Gupta 2022). In China, a racialized division between labor markets and workers has forced ethnic minorities into low-paid industries, whereas their Han counterparts are channeled into high-wage sectors (Hasmath 2008, 2019). In Xinjiang, the Chinese state has used the terms terrorist and extremist to racialize Turkic Muslims (e.g., Uyghurs and Kazakhs) as disposable and worthless (Brophy 2019; Byler 2021). As a result, Turkic Muslim groups in Xinjiang have been intensively expropriated, displaced, and exploited for capital accumulation (Byler 2021). In this study, I use the concept of racial

capitalism to analyze how Kazakhs have been racialized based on their mobile pastoral traditions, enslaved in the “debt economy,” and exploited through husbandry policies and programs.

### **Methods: Ethnography and Document Collection in a Case Study**

Through a case study of Altay Prefecture I aim to elucidate how the Chinese state has achieved dispossession and capital accumulation through the management of the land, ethnicity, and culture of the Kazakh people. As an intrinsic case for this study, Altay Prefecture was not selected but was assigned based on accessibility (Stake 1995). As my hometown, Altay Prefecture, was the most convenient field in which to access and collect data because I have many acquaintances in and native knowledge of the region. My half-Han, half-Mongol ethnic background helped me maintain a balance between “insider” and “outsider” statuses (Brewer 2000). This study seeks to develop a thorough understanding of racial capitalism at work in this region based on interpretation of the data rather than generalization.

My data-gathering activities accounted for scouting, feasibility, and safety. Between September and November 2020, I conducted ethnographic work in Altay Prefecture. Since ethnography studies people’s ordinary activities and their social meanings “in naturally occurring settings” (Brewer 2000, p. 10), the methodology fits my study well. I took field notes on my observations at approximately fifty sites, taking more than 400 pictures and engaging in casual conversations with the local residents, which were primarily conducted in Mandarin. Importantly, the fieldwork lasted less than three months, and exploring husbandry development was only part of the research objectives.

Surveys and formal interviews were ruled out as data collection approaches because of the draconian crackdown in the region since 2017 (please see the previous section: Colonial Restructuring of Xinjiang).<sup>24</sup> During the crackdown, compliant surveys and interviews have been feasible only when they are conducted by researchers from Chinese-affiliated institutions (e.g., a university or research institute under the supervision of the CCP). During the ethnographic work, the CCP launched a war on spies in Altay Prefecture to encourage citizens to report suspicious events and individuals, and the definition of espionage is ambiguous. Any foreign-affiliated research activity can be defined as espionage and potentially lead to imprisonment. Therefore, building upon the ethnographic work, I conducted a thorough investigation of both official and unofficial documents, which contributed the majority of the data I used in the findings. I followed two principles to collect documents. First, the data sources had to be credible. For example, I collected social policies and official reports from official government websites and local authoritative news agencies, such as the official websites of the Altay Prefecture administrative office, Altay City government, and Altay News. Second, policies had to be implemented on the ground. For example, I triangulated online data with fieldnotes to ascertain whether and how policies had been implemented.

In the data analysis, I drew insights from a seven-step analytical framework by Ngai-Ling Sum (2009) to critically examine social policies: First, where do particular policy ideas and their related discursive networks originate? Second, which actors, both individual and collective, become involved in the policy discursive networks that construct objects of political and economic governance? Third, what ideas (or knowledge brands) are selected and drawn upon to recontextualize the referents of these objects? Fourth, how do these ideas enter into the policy discourse and everyday practices? Fifth, how do these modes of thought discipline and/or governmentalize the organization of spaces, policies, and diverse populations? Sixth, how do they become part of the hegemonic logic challenged by diverse social forces? Seventh, how are they challenged and negotiated to maintain unstable



equilibria of compromise? In this study, I mainly focused on the first five steps because of data source limitations. Since I could not access the policy makers and internal policies in Altay Prefecture, here, I trace only when and how the policy discourses are referenced, operationalized, and legitimized.

To avoid potential harm to the local residents in Altay Prefecture, no specific individual can be identified through any data presented in this paper.

## **Racial Capitalism and Husbandry Development in Altay Prefecture**

Building upon Kazakh mobile pastoralism, the Chinese state has rapidly developed husbandry in Altay Prefecture to achieve the accumulation of capital through a particular mode of racial capitalism. In the formation of racial capitalism in Altay's husbandry industry, the three initiatives play vital roles. In the name of ecological civilization, land dispossession and a herder sedentarization project have been used to create prerequisites for the emergence of racial capitalism through the racialized proletarianization of Kazakhs. The BRI has fueled the growth of racial capitalism by subsuming Altay Prefecture into the Chinese economy at both the national and international levels. The war on poverty has justified the racialization of Kazakhs and the development of racial capitalism. As a result, Kazakhs have been racialized based on their mobile pastoral traditions; they have been enslaved in a "debt economy"; their land has been appropriated into Chinese industrial production chains to produce value; and they have been excluded, segregated, and exploited in the local husbandry industry, which features a Kazakh-Han hierarchy.

## **Historical Changes in Kazakh Pastoralism under Chinese Rule**

Before the rapid development of the husbandry industry in Altay Prefecture, Kazakh pastoralism had undergone important changes under Chinese rule. Prior to 1949, grassland ownership was determined mainly by the leaders of Kazakh pastoral tribes based on kinship (Zhang 2004). When the CCP gained control of Altay Prefecture in 1949, the Chinese did not immediately overturn the land system of the Kazakh tribes, as they did in Han rural regions. Instead, in August 1952, the Central Party Committee Xinjiang Division recognized pastoralism as "essentially different from feudal landlord economy" and deemed it in need of protection (Zhang 2004). This might be attributed to the CCP's relative lack of legitimate base and knowledge in Xinjiang at the time (McMillen 1984).

Therefore, between 1952 and 1959, the Altay government established pastoral-agricultural cooperatives and public-private partnership pastures, which partially preserved the Kazakh tribal system and absorbed only a small portion of Kazakh herders in the prefecture. In 1959, the Altay government began to transform cooperatives and pastures into people's communes. Although the communes confiscated the grasslands and livestock previously owned by the herders, Kazakhs largely preserved their mobile lifestyle by herding for the communes, and after collective retention, the production of their work was distributed to each household according to their work records (Zhang 2004).

In 1978, the CCP began to abandon the communes and adopt a market-oriented approach for China's economic development, which then changed the Party's previous stance on pastoralism in Xinjiang. In 1986, the Xinjiang Party Committee convened a meeting in Altay City, where it proposed "five transformations" in pastoralism: transitioning from pastoralism to sedentarism or semi-sedentarism; shifting from husbandry dependent on weather conditions and extensive management to scientific husbandry and management; altering from single to diversified operations; changing from the natural economy of self-sufficient production to large-scale commercial production; moving from traditional husbandry to modern husbandry (Zhang 2004).

Guided by a market-oriented approach, the Xinjiang government has explored potential routes for the more efficient use of land and more productive modes of husbandry production to replace less productive pastoralism. Before 2009, however, the Xinjiang government had not yet devised a strategy to achieve those transformations. As a result, between 1988 and 1995, the Altay government rented grasslands to Kazakh herders via two systems: grassland usage permissions and pasture-paid contracts. Between 1988 and 1990, the Altay government granted grassland usage permissions to 17,105 Kazakh households, and from 1994 to 1995, 16,813 Kazakh herders signed pasture-paid contracts with the government (Zhang 2004). Although grasslands in Altay Prefecture have been under socialist property ownership since 1959, through these two systems, Kazakh herders regained land use rights; largely preserved their mobile lifestyle; and sold meat, milk, and wool in the local market. Nevertheless, Kazakh herders have encountered fraudulent systems, degraded grasslands, and a surge in living costs, leading many to return to Kazakhstan through the Oralman repatriation program (Cerny 2010) launched by the country shortly after independence in 1991.

### ***Ecological Enclosure, Sedentarization, and the Racialized Proletarianization of Kazakhs***

Pastoral enclosures and sedentarization projects mark the commencement of racial capitalism in Altay's husbandry industry. Along with decollectivization and the embrace of a market economy since the 1980s, the Chinese state has actively implemented enclosure movements and herder sedentarization projects in Tibet and Inner Mongolia (Ptackova 2012, 2020; Williams 1996). In Xinjiang, herder sedentarization began in 1986 when the Xinjiang Party Committee devised the "five transformations" of pastoralism. Between 1986 and 2008, the Altay government sedentarized 3221 Kazakh households in Altay Prefecture. Before 2009, sedentarization projects were small in scale, were isolated from the corresponding services (e.g., transportation, schools, and medical services), and lacked plans for further integration of sedentarized Kazakhs into the Chinese economy. Since 2009, however, the Chinese state has designed and implemented the High-Standard Herder Sedentarization Projects (HSHSP) in Altay Prefecture, along with an enclosure movement justified by ecological civilization, marking the culmination of herder sedentarization in Altay's history. By the end of 2019, 31,618 Kazakh pastoral households had been dispossessed and sedentarized through the HSHSP in Altay Prefecture, constituting 90.6% of Kazakh pastoral households registered in the region in 2008.

The current policies of ecological enclosure and sedentarization in Altay Prefecture can be traced back to the 1990s, when the ecological agenda was for the first time used in an enclosure movement against Mongolian herders (Williams 1996). Partially inspired by the New Village Movement in South Korea in the 1970s, the Chinese state began implementing a program to turn pastureland into grasslands in 2003, which aimed primarily to restore degraded grasslands by enforcing a grazing ban and resettling affected pastoral households in Tibet (Ptackova 2012; 2020). In 2004, an ecological resettlement program was introduced in Eastern Tibet with a focus on poverty alleviation for pastoral households (Ptackova 2011, 2020). The HSHSP was designed based on the successes of Tibetan sedentarization programs implemented between 2001 and 2008.<sup>25</sup> Unlike previous sedentarization programs, the HSHSP aims to not only sedentarize Kazakh herders but also assimilate them into the Chinese state economically, socially, and culturally.

Pastoral sedentarization programs reflect a racist attitude toward mobile pastoralism rooted in both sedentary Chinese civilization and the Marx-Lenin-Mao model of

hierarchical social evolution (Ptackova 2020; Williams 1996). Since the imperial era, the racist attitude that urges a “superior” sedentary Chinese civilization to civilize “backward” mobile minorities on the “periphery” has been persistent (Ptackova 2020). Since 1949, this attitude has been reinforced by the Marx-Lenin-Mao model of social evolution, in which “hunting and gathering was the most primitive form, followed by mobile pastoralism, followed by sedentary agriculture, followed by industrial society with its class contradictions that eventually precipitate the socialist state” (Williams 1996, p.673). This racist attitude echoes a technique of racial capitalism that relegates some populations to lesser human status based on their “unproductive” relationships of reproduction with nature (Shiva 1991). As a result, Kazakh herders have been turned into proletariat wage-earners in the context of racism through ecological enclosure and sedentarization.

In pastoral sedentarization programs, although herders’ cash income may increase through subsidies, daily expenditures surge and the social, cultural, and ecological aspects of traditional pastoralist livelihoods have been severely curtailed (Ptackova 2012; 2020). My observations suggested that many sedentarized Kazakhs could not survive the sedentarization programs. The assignment of pastures for sedentarized Kazakhs was normally performed arbitrarily by Chinese officials without considering the actual situation. As a result, many Kazakh herders were assigned pastures in poor condition and had to seek alternative ways to survive: some emigrated to Kazakhstan, whereas others moved to urban areas to make a living. For those who sought to survive in urban areas, however, there were insufficient numbers of jobs offered in the market and sedentarized herders rarely possess the skills, experience, and qualifications for available positions. As a result, the Chinese state has labeled unemployed sedentarized Kazakhs “rural surplus laborers” (Chi. 农村富裕劳动力), who need to be further assimilated into Chinese industrial production chains through various policies and programs.<sup>26</sup> While the development of a husbandry industry can “utilize” the “surplus” manpower to achieve greater productivity, it could ultimately prevent sedentarized Kazakhs from returning to a pastoral lifestyle.

The use of “rural surplus laborers” to define Kazakhs is a process of racialization in which those Kazakhs represent no “utility” for capital. As Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018) argued, populations that are marked as “surplus” in production are dehumanized through a logic of economic productivity. In Altay Prefecture, sedentarized Kazakhs are racialized based on the exclusion from production and need to be elevated to a status closer to that of humans (but not fully achieving humans) through poverty alleviation programs under the supervision of Han Chinese.

### ***Husbandry Development in Altay Prefecture***

As the largest industry in Altay Prefecture,<sup>27</sup> modern husbandry has been built upon not only the racialized proletarianization of Kazakh herders but also Kazakh livestock-feeding traditions in the region. Altay Prefecture is home to massive grasslands, optimal sheep species, and skilled Kazakh herders, which are favorable conditions for developing this industry. For example, Altay sheep, a sheep species cultivated by local herders for centuries, can survive at extremely cold or hot temperatures, and their meat is tasty but not gamy. Although both Kazakh pastoralism and modern husbandry concern livestock-feeding practices, they differ in terms of the relationships between Kazakhs and the Chinese economy in which they operate. In pastoralism, Kazakh herders can, to some degree, live in a self-sufficient economy outside of the Chinese market process: they feed themselves with livestock, receive medical treatment from tribal doctors, and educate children in yurts. In industrial husbandry, however, Kazakh land, identity, and culture are intensively subsumed into the Chinese economy.

In Altay Prefecture, the formal development of husbandry unfolded in three overlapping stages. In the first stage (2009–2014), the government focused on the sedentarization of Kazakhs along with their livestock. As a result, primitive husbandry was developed in areas designated for sedentary populations. In the second stage (2014–present), the government has encouraged sedentarized Kazakhs to engage in Chinese market competition. In the third stage (2019–present), the government has directly replaced native-born husbandry, developed by sedentarized Kazakhs in the previous stages, with Chinese enterprises with more “advanced” modes of husbandry that directly absorb Kazakh land, ethnicity, and culture into the broader Chinese economy at the national and international levels.

The first stage started at the same time as the HSHSP in 2009. Ordered by the Xinjiang government, the Altay government chose herder sedentarization locations near water, grasslands, and farmland where forage crops for livestock could be cultivated.<sup>28</sup> In some locations, the government developed forage land and irrigation reservoirs. For example, in 2009, the government in Qinggil developed 3800 acres of forage land for sixty sedentarized Kazakh households.<sup>29</sup> In 2011, the Altay government built two irrigation reservoirs in two sedentarization locations, one in Qinggil and the other in Burultogay, which provided water for livestock and forage cultivation. In the early stage, the primitive development of husbandry accommodated the sedentarization projects in which the priority was to anchor Kazakh herders in fixed, manageable locations.

In the first stage, sedentarized Kazakhs gradually lost some of their mobile pastoral traditions. In pastoral areas, Kazakhs do not need to grow forage crops for their livestock; instead, they chase unfrozen grasslands through seasonal migration. Kazakh herders specialize in predicting weather conditions based on observation, which helps them decide the timing of migration. In sedentary husbandry, however, such knowledge has become obsolete and has been replaced by new knowledge of how to use irrigation systems and cultivate forage crops. Here, a technique of racial capitalism has been used to devalue indigenous knowledge and practices through a logic of economic productivity.

The second stage began in 2014. To improve productivity, the Altay government has encouraged sedentarized Kazakhs to develop more intensive husbandry production modes. Three major modes of modern husbandry have been developed in this stage: family pastures (Chi. 家庭牧场), standardized husbandry communities (Chi. 标准化养殖小区), and husbandry cooperatives (Chi. 养殖合作社).

The family pasture mode is a modern husbandry production mode in which Kazakhs adopt “advanced” husbandry techniques to run large-scale farms. In this mode, Kazakhs must build sheepfolds or cattle folds with heat, optimize sheep or cattle species, grow silage, and expand the production scale.<sup>30</sup> In the second mode, a standardized husbandry community, which is a community with all the necessary modern facilities for husbandry, is built by the government. In 2014, the Altay government invested 104.95 million RMB (renminbi, the official currency of the People’s Republic of China)<sup>31</sup> to build sixty-six standardized husbandry communities, each of which was equipped with standardized cattle folds of more than 1000 square meters, silage cellars, fences, veterinary rooms, and sanitizing rooms.<sup>32</sup> Finally, husbandry cooperatives are corporation-like organizations shared by several households. Kazakhs can start cooperatives to build large-scale husbandry farms by incorporating the resources (e.g., money, facilities, and livestock) of all the members, thereby gaining a significant advantage in market competition.

The adoption of “advanced” techniques is key to all three modes, since each involves building modern husbandry facilities, such as sheep and cattle folds, silage cellars, and independent veterinary rooms. The building of facilities requires Kazakhs to gain new knowledge and change their previous ways of feeding livestock. To “modernize” Kazakhs, the Altay government has organized technique training sessions. For example, in 2015, in Chemurcek, a Kazakh village near Altay City, the government organized events for local

Kazakhs to observe and learn how family pastures operate.<sup>33</sup> In 2021, the Altay government invested 200,000 RMB in 120 group training sessions with 5000 learning materials distributed across the entire prefecture.<sup>34</sup>

The promotion of “advanced” husbandry techniques is a way of racializing ethnic minorities in the Chinese context, where minority groups are cast as “weak,” “small,” “backward,” and thus in need of leadership from the “advanced” Han and CCP (Barabantseva 2008; Zang 2016). In the context of contemporary Chinese governance, the word *suzhi* (Chi. 素质), denoting the quality of humanness, has been used to justify social and political hierarchies of all sorts (Kipnis 2006). While Han ethnicity is a marker of developed, modern high-*suzhi* citizens, ethnic minorities are categorized as low-*suzhi* sub-citizens who lack “scientific knowledge, technical skills, willingness and ability to labor diligently, or desire for capital accumulation” (Yeh 2013, p. 265). In the Kazakh case, Kazakhs are required to accept “advanced” techniques because their traditional ways of production are considered “unproductive,” “unstable,” and ultimately, “backward.” In the promotion of “advanced” husbandry techniques, Kazakh traditional pastoralism has been used as a racializing marker because it is deemed invisible and valueless in terms of economic productivity. As a result, those Kazakhs are assigned a lesser-human status and considered a low-*suzhi* population that is unable to escape and exploit nature and needs guidance from the Han and the state. The Chinese state has diminished Kazakh traditions in the name of capitalist imperatives, rationalized the racialization of Kazakhs, and ultimately justified the assimilation of Kazakh production into the Chinese economy for capital accumulation.

In addition, the three modes involve loans that alter the architecture of capital accumulation. Although the Chinese state has provided limited financial support to a small number of Kazakhs,<sup>35</sup> the majority must borrow from rural credit cooperatives. For example, in 2016, the Altay Rural Credit Cooperative, the largest privately-owned bank in rural Altay Prefecture, provided three-year-long, guarantee-free loans for impoverished Kazakhs, but the loans could not exceed a cap of 50,000 RMB per household and had undisclosed interest rates.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the loans were far from sufficient for some Kazakh households that sought to expand their production scale and introduce optimal species to survive market competition. For example, the price of a high-quality Simmental bred heifer ranges between 20,000 and 30,000 RMB per cow, with additional expenses for vaccination, medication, forage, and other facilities required for each cow. Depending on the scale of husbandry production and animal species, costs can amount to 300,000 RMB or more.

Therefore, to promote more intensive husbandry production modes, in 2018, the Altay government implemented a policy requiring local financial institutions to provide uncapped loans to livestock owners at interest rates aligned with the benchmark rates of the People’s Bank of China.<sup>37</sup> According to the policy, banks and insurance companies should be lenient in terms of loan amounts, repayment timelines, and lending procedures. In many cases, indebted Kazakhs are unable to pay loans, resulting in defaults and restrictions on economic activity and mobility. On one of the largest professional business search engines in China, Aiqicha, thousands of Kazakhs have been listed as defaulters across Xinjiang, with some of them having defaulted on loans borrowed from the Altay Rural Credit Cooperative. In one case, a Kazakh household in Altay Prefecture defaulted on a loan of 6,715,871.88 RMB, comprising principal of 4,200,000, interest of 2,094,144.25, and a penalty of 466,727.63.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, due to China’s Social Credit System, Kazakh defaulters face restrictions on economic activity and mobility, thereby further worsening their situation.

A similar situation occurred in Tibet. In 2007, the Agricultural Bank of China provided three-year interest-free loans between 10,000 and 30,000 RMB to pastoral households for housing, but many villagers were unable to pay back the loans, forcing the government to partially or completely cancel them (Yeh 2013). In Altay Prefecture, however, the loans are



too large to be forgiven. As a result, the indebted Kazakhs have been exploited and enslaved in a new form of capital accumulation—the debt economy (Federici 2014). In a debt economy, “the exploiters are more hidden, more removed, and the mechanisms of exploitation are far more individualized and guilt producing” (Federici 2014, p. 235). In the Kazakh case, financial institutions work with the Chinese government to atomize, enslave, exploit, and oppress Kazakhs in the guise of self-investment debts.

Moreover, the Kazakh tribal society has transformed into a nuclear family structure (Liu 2011), thus reorienting Kazakh social reproduction processes toward the Chinese economy. The traditional ways of Kazakh social reproduction have been racialized because they fail to reproduce productive workers for the Chinese industrial production chains. While Kazakh households have experienced a surge in their daily expenditures, since they must now purchase, upgrade, and maintain equipment; purchase groceries; and pay for electricity, they have lost the traditional provision from tribes. Moreover, the absence of state welfare for Kazakh households has worsened their situation. According to the Public Provision Report in 2018, the Altay government provided direct financial and medical support only to elderly people, orphans, impoverished children, children with hernias, and people with disabilities.<sup>39</sup> As a result, Kazakh social reproduction processes have been increasingly infiltrated, commodified, and exploited for capital accumulation, while social provisioning, from both traditional communities and the state, has been largely dismantled. Although a new type of place-based social organization (Kaz. туыс) has emerged in the sedentarized villages to restore social provision for Kazakh households, it is unclear how effective those organizations are. By decomposing Kazakh tribal society and withholding state welfare, Han Chinese can preserve their racialized privilege in social reproduction processes.

In February 2016, the Xinjiang government adopted Xi’s war on poverty, which requires subordinate governments to alleviate poverty by introducing Chinese enterprises; converging primary, secondary, and tertiary industries; and creating more job opportunities.<sup>40</sup> To respond to Xi’s campaign, the Altay government has been actively introducing Chinese national and international enterprises to further absorb local husbandry into the Chinese economy and presumably create more job opportunities for impoverished Kazakhs.

An example from the cattle industry helps explain how Chinese enterprises have subjugated Kazakh traditional livelihood as well as social and cultural practices to the Chinese national and international economy. Backed by the Altay government, Xinjiang Hualing Industry Commerce (Group) Corporation Limited (XHICCL) expanded into Altay Prefecture to develop cattle husbandry in 640 Mesa, one of the largest Kazakh sedentarization locations, with five concentration villages and 1020 Kazakh households.<sup>41</sup> The enterprise, established in Ürümqi in 1988, owns the largest market in northwest China and businesses in Central Asia and Eastern Europe.<sup>42</sup> In 2021, the XHICCL formally began working in cattle husbandry in Altay Prefecture by building a large cattle husbandry industry.<sup>43</sup> Through land transfer, the enterprise grabbed Kazakh land and built one of the largest and most “advanced” cattle husbandry farms, named Ten-Thousand Cattle Park, in 640 Mesa. In the park, the enterprise introduced three optimal cattle species (Simmental cattle, Angus cattle, and Xinjiang Brown cattle) and built a comprehensive cattle husbandry system in which everything, from fodder planting to beef processing, is performed within.<sup>44</sup> The park is expected to feed 20,000 heads of cattle and generate 3000 jobs for nearby residents.<sup>45</sup>

In the case above, the Altay government introduced a well-developed Chinese enterprise directly into a Kazakh sedentarization location to build a modern cattle industry. There, Kazakhs have not only been dispossessed again through land transfer but also been transformed into wage laborers to work in the industry. The development of cattle husbandry farms has shifted the relationship between Kazakhs and the Chinese economy. Through the national and international logistics of Chinese enterprises, beef products

produced by Kazakhs are sold across the whole country and around the world. For example, on China's largest e-commerce platforms (e.g., Taobao and JD.com), Chinese customers can easily purchase beef products from the park. Hence, the Chinese enterprise has embedded local cattle husbandry products from Altay Prefecture into the Chinese economy by selling products in national and international markets.

In Altay Prefecture, the building of husbandry by Chinese enterprises reflects a particular mode of racial capitalism. The Chinese state has accumulated capital by exploiting the ethnicity, culture, and land of the Kazakh people. First, in Chinese industrial production chains, Altay Prefecture, a Kazakh region, has become a producer and processor of livestock products that are then consumed in Han-dominated regions. At the very beginning of capitalism in Europe, the development of capitalism did not homogenize as much as differentiate "regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones" (Robinson 2000, p. 26). In the Chinese context, the racialization of the Kazakh homeland is achieved through the remaking of Kazakh pastoral history and livestock-feeding traditions to fit into the Chinese nation, in which exotic pastoralism is constructed as a perfect complement to the agrarian values of the Han majority by catering to the growing Chinese appetite for meat and dairy products (White 2020). The Chinese state does not aim to completely eliminate Kazakh traditions but works to remake the traditions into exploitable forms for the Chinese economy through the mutual reinforcement between racialization, capitalization, and modernization. As a result, a new, capitalized, and racialized form of the Kazakh homeland has been made to accumulate capital through Chinese industrial production chains where Han consumers can buy "authentically pastoral" products produced in a region with Kazakh pastoral history and traditions.

Second, the husbandry industry embodies a pattern of hierarchy, exclusion, and segregation. Based on the Chinese imagination of Kazakh pastoral history and practices, Kazakhs are racialized as "ethnic people on horseback," which links Kazakhs to pastoralism and animal husbandry in a timeless, indispensable way. This racialized image has circulated throughout the Chinese media and has even been promoted by the Chinese government to attract Han tourists.<sup>46</sup> Along with the racialization of mobile pastoralism in the Chinese context, Kazakhs are figured as a low-*suzbi* group that only engages in animal husbandry and needs guidance from the high-*suzbi* Han and the Chinese state. As a result, in the husbandry industry, Han Chinese predominantly occupy white-collar positions with decent wages, while their Kazakh counterparts are hired as livestock feeders and carers supervised by Han managers. There, the operation of racial capitalism, which has distributed economic opportunities and outcomes along the racially demarcated line between Kazakhs and Han Chinese, has rationalized a Kazakh-Han racial hierarchy.

As an embodiment of racialization, some Chinese enterprises blatantly exclude Kazakhs and other racialized minorities in their job postings. For example, in an online job posting by Xinjiang Wangyuan Biological Technology Group Corporation Limited, all open positions directly indicate that they only accept Han Chinese applicants.<sup>47</sup> The blatant racism against Kazakhs in those postings also reflects a deep distrust of ethnic minorities in Chinese economic and political power, which regards being of Han ethnicity as an indicator of loyalty. In some cases, insecure, low-paid job postings exclusively accept Kazakh applicants because employers consider Kazakhs fit for these positions. The stratification of labor markets can lead to higher unemployment rates among ethnic minorities, thereby pushing them into precarious jobs or the gig economy (Bhattacharyya 2018) and reproducing racialized hierarchies. The operation of racial capitalism in Altay's husbandry industry has excluded racialized Kazakhs from the formal wage economy or relegated them to lower-status work, further jeopardizing Kazakh social reproduction. As a result, in the husbandry driven by Chinese enterprises, Kazakhs are racially exploited through exclusion, hierarchy, and segregation.

While some Kazakhs have been absorbed into the husbandry industry through the above programs, many have been excluded from the industry. Based on my observations in 2020, many sedentarized Kazakhs had to relocate to urban Altay and lived in public rental apartments (Chi. 公租房) built by the Altay government. There, they lived with impoverished Han Chinese and other ethnic minorities. The government intended to use those apartments to build “dynamically embedded inter-ethnic communities” (Chi. 多民族互嵌型社区) to promote ethnic unity. In urban Altay, relocated Kazakhs struggled to find jobs. While some were employed as assistant police officers, security guards, grassroots community workers, and restaurant servers, others had to find precarious work through WeChat<sup>48</sup> groups where Kazakhs shared work opportunities with one another. The Chinese state will continue to encounter the Kazakh “problem” that it created starting in 1949.

## Conclusions

In Altay Prefecture, a border region inhabited by pastoral Turkic Muslims, the Chinese state has built a particular mode of racial capitalism since 2009 to achieve dispossession and capital accumulation through the remaking of Kazakh land, culture, and ethnicity. In the Chinese mode of racial capitalism, Kazakhs have been racialized based on their mobile pastoral traditions in the Chinese context; they have been enslaved in the “debt economy”; their land has been reassigned into Chinese industrial production chains to produce value; and they have been excluded, segregated, and exploited in the husbandry industry, which features a Kazakh-Han hierarchy.

This study contributes to our understanding of how particular forms of racialization and racial capitalism have emerged in one of China’s ethnic minority border regions in Xi’s era. In Altay Prefecture, Kazakhs have been racialized as “backward,” “unproductive,” “surplus,” and “low-*suzhi*” sub-citizens who are unable to escape and exploit nature and need to be managed by the Chinese state and Han Chinese.

This study has two major policy implications. First, it reveals how China’s policies are formed and adopted in an ethnic minority region in Xi’s era. In response to China’s national goals, the Altay government has merged the narratives of ecological civilization and the war on poverty with the goals of neoliberal development and ethnic management to create a series of tailored policies targeting Kazakhs. In the process, the Altay government has deciphered national policies and translated them for the local context.

Second, this study can provide valuable insights into China’s BRI from a border perspective. Unlike the development of camel husbandry in inner Mongolia where Mongol elites adopted the BRI discourse to defend pastoralism against state territorialization and destabilize spatial hierarchies (White 2020), Kazakhs in Altay have limited autonomy and must accept state arrangements. There are two possible reasons for these differences. First, the development of cattle husbandry occurred alongside the crackdown on Turkic Muslims, which severely undermined Kazakhs’ ability to resist state territorialization. Second, Altay Prefecture plays a more essential role in the BRI than does Inner Mongolia, which may prompt the Chinese state to intervene there more. In Altay’s latest Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), the government plans to deepen the region’s economic ties with Russia and Kazakhstan by linking Jeminay Port with the New Eurasia Land Bridge Corridor and building the Western Line Project of Sino–Russian Oil Pipes and the Sino–Russian Jikprin Port in Altay Prefecture. This study explicates how the Chinese state accumulates capital through the management of ethnic Kazakhs on its border, which can expand our understanding of how Chinese capitalistic expansion might operate in Russia and Kazakhstan in the future through the management of racial and ethnic groups beyond China’s borders.

### Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Sara Dorow for providing extensive feedback to earlier versions of this paper, and to Celine Beaulieu and Alexandra Gagnon for organizing the Brown Bag Speaker Series where this paper was first presented. Thanks also to Sourayan Mookerjea and Reza Hasmath for their feedback, and to the anonymous reviewers and editors of the *Du Bois Review* for their comments. I extend special thanks to the informants in Altay Prefecture for their assistance in collecting the data.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to the latest population census in Kazakhstan, ethnic Kazakhs number 13.5 million people, which composes 68.5% of the country's total population. See <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrJmJiNjU5NzItZWYyZi00Mjc2LTg5OWQeN2I2Y2QxY2I0NzEzIiwidCI6ImRlNzAxMmMyLTlTl0M2MtNDFjMi04NjRmLWE5YmEyMGY0YzUxOSIsImMiOiJ9&pageName=ReportSection7e0131f57a0773bd8643> (accessed July 25, 2024).
- <sup>2</sup> According to the latest statistics yearbook of China in 2021. See <https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsjs/2021/indexch.htm> (accessed July 26, 2024).
- <sup>3</sup> See <https://web.archive.org/web/20180822145750/https://www.stat.uz/en/press-center/news-committee/435-analiticheskie-materialy-en1/2075-demographic-situation-in-the-republic-of-uzbekistan> (accessed July 25, 2024).
- <sup>4</sup> Uyghurs are a Turkic Muslim group primarily inhabiting the southwest part of Xinjiang; Uyghurs are also the largest indigenous group in Xinjiang.
- <sup>5</sup> See [https://www.gov.cn/zmyw/200907/c/content\\_1369230.htm](https://www.gov.cn/zmyw/200907/c/content_1369230.htm) (accessed July 26, 2024).
- <sup>6</sup> See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-29170238> (accessed July 25, 2024).
- <sup>7</sup> See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27225308> (accessed July 26, 2024) and <https://thediplomat.com/2014/04/counterterrorism-ethnic-unity-the-focus-as-xi-visits-xinjiang/> (accessed July 25, 2024).
- <sup>8</sup> See the report from Australian Strategic Policy: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale> (accessed July 25, 2024).
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> See <http://www.altxw.com/ggxx/system/2021/06/22/030089613.shtml> (accessed June 13, 2022).
- <sup>12</sup> See [http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/zt/2007-10/29/content\\_374272.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/zt/2007-10/29/content_374272.htm) (accessed July 26, 2024).
- <sup>13</sup> See <https://www.12371.cn/special/xxzd/hxnr/> (accessed July 26, 2024).
- <sup>14</sup> See [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2011-08/09/content\\_2821.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2011-08/09/content_2821.htm) (accessed July 26, 2024).
- <sup>15</sup> See <http://www.npcxj.com/index.php/Lew/info/type1/difangxingfaguiguizhang/id/30059.html> (accessed July 3, 2022).
- <sup>16</sup> See [http://www.ce.cn/cysc/stwm/zxdt/202111/09/t20211109\\_37071434.shtml](http://www.ce.cn/cysc/stwm/zxdt/202111/09/t20211109_37071434.shtml) (accessed July 26, 2024).
- <sup>17</sup> See <http://www.xjalt.gov.cn/govxxgk/DD001/2018-08-01/0e3a328c-5446-4d21-b7e7-3a88e421f699.html> (accessed July 26, 2024).
- <sup>18</sup> See [https://www.ts.cn/zxpd/xy/202211/t20221110\\_9973819.shtml](https://www.ts.cn/zxpd/xy/202211/t20221110_9973819.shtml) (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>19</sup> See <http://www.xjalt.gov.cn/sjalt/020005/20220512/3bba4bc2-2523-4506-baca-375215967a3b.html> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>20</sup> See [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-12/07/content\\_5020963.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-12/07/content_5020963.htm) (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> See [http://www.china.com.cn/lianghui/fangtan/2016-02/18/content\\_37818171.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/lianghui/fangtan/2016-02/18/content_37818171.htm) (accessed July 25, 2024).
- <sup>23</sup> The original announcement was deleted from the official website of the Altay Prefecture Administrative Office. I found an archived copy on a reliable archive website in China: [http://www.law-lib.com/law/law\\_view1.asp?id=547070](http://www.law-lib.com/law/law_view1.asp?id=547070) (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>24</sup> See the Xinjiang Victims Database, which records 2783 ethnic Kazakhs who were or are detained in extrajudicial camps and 497 camp victims in Altay Prefecture: <https://shahit.biz/eng/#stats> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>25</sup> See <https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fzggw/jgsj/njs/sjdt/201209/P020191101560683799534.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>26</sup> See <https://www.xjalt.gov.cn/003/003016/20240412/6c5ca9de-0730-4eda-8b31-a3d86c924258.html> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>27</sup> See the Statistical Communiqué of Altay Prefecture in 2021: <https://web.archive.org/web/20221105005422/http://web.archive.org/screenshot/http://www.xjalt.gov.cn/sjalt/020005/20220616/2f4a0226-88bb-4cfa-b643-d1655a28d250.html> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>28</sup> See [http://xj.cnr.cn/gd/200908/t20090811\\_505427354.html](http://xj.cnr.cn/gd/200908/t20090811_505427354.html) (accessed July 25, 2024).

- <sup>29</sup> See <https://web.archive.org/web/2022111215738/http://web.archive.org/screenshot/http://www.xjalt.gov.cn/003/003005/20180620/f4870713-7e77-4e4f-831f-5bf6ba22df6b.html> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>30</sup> See the report by Altay News Agency: [https://archive.org/details/20221112\\_20221112\\_0329](https://archive.org/details/20221112_20221112_0329) (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>31</sup> The USD-RMB exchange rates have fluctuated between 6.3 and 7.3 over the last five years. See <https://www.wsj.com/market-data/quotes/fx/USDCNY/advanced-chart> (accessed July 25, 2024).
- <sup>32</sup> See <http://www.xjalt.gov.cn/003/003006/20180620/0afd58ff-b60b-44c5-a1bd-c4d405035195.html> (accessed August 2, 2022).
- <sup>33</sup> See <http://www.xjalt.gov.cn/003/003006/20180620/8047af5a-29bb-4fce-be3a-db216c414d75.html> (accessed November 12, 2022).
- <sup>34</sup> Downloaded from [https://archive.org/details/20221112\\_20221112\\_0346](https://archive.org/details/20221112_20221112_0346) (accessed July 25, 2024).
- <sup>35</sup> See <http://www.xjalt.gov.cn/003/003005/20180620/5d971721-22ca-453d-8668-6129658f1695.html> (accessed October 27, 2022).
- <sup>36</sup> See [https://archive.org/details/20240430\\_20240430\\_1949](https://archive.org/details/20240430_20240430_1949) (accessed July 25, 2024). By comparison, in 2022, Altay's average GDP per capita was 59,739 RMB, and the average income after tax in rural Altay was 17,005 RMB. See <https://www.xjalt.gov.cn/sjalt/020005/20230531/172ce1d5-c4a2-4a11-8088-354ff7ac23d7.html> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>37</sup> See <https://xjalt.gov.cn/govxxgk/DD001/2018-11-22/523c2889-5362-4045-bd7f-3008fd4b4ed7.html> (accessed July 27, 2024). The benchmark rates of the People's Bank of China are 4.35% (within a year), 4.75% (between one year and five years), and 4.90% (above five years). See <http://camlmac.pbc.gov.cn/zhengcehuobisi/125207/125213/125440/125838/125885/125896/2968998/index.html> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>38</sup> See <https://archive.org/details/default-loan> (accessed July 25, 2024).
- <sup>39</sup> See <http://www.xjalt.gov.cn/govxxgk/DD012/2018-12-18/aaa0381d-e6da-4d12-bc40-a97d6642596f.html> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>40</sup> See [http://www.china.com.cn/lianghui/fangtan/2016-02/18/content\\_37818171.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/lianghui/fangtan/2016-02/18/content_37818171.htm) (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>41</sup> See <http://www.xjalt.gov.cn/003/003005/20180620/398101c7-1e50-4acd-8a4d-34fe99e1c42f.html> (accessed November 14, 2022).
- <sup>42</sup> See <http://www.hualing.cn/page-10.html> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>43</sup> See [https://aiqicha.baidu.com/company\\_detail\\_97896541985477](https://aiqicha.baidu.com/company_detail_97896541985477) (accessed July 27, 2024) and: <http://xj.people.com.cn/n2/2021/0822/c394722-34878416.html> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> See <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1697804228058419134&wfr=spider&for=pc> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>46</sup> See <https://www.brj.gov.cn/lybej/006002/20190702/96d70a94-f44a-4898-b455-f3c08efec658.html> (accessed July 27, 2024).
- <sup>47</sup> See [https://archive.org/details/20221116\\_20221116\\_2002](https://archive.org/details/20221116_20221116_2002) (accessed July 25, 2024).
- <sup>48</sup> WeChat is one of the largest social media platforms in China.

## References

- Ang, Sylvia (2018). The 'New Chinatown': The Racialization of Newly Arrived Chinese Migrants in Singapore. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(7): 1177–1194.
- Barabantseva, Elena (2008). From the Language of Class to the Rhetoric of Development: Discourses of 'Nationality' and 'Ethnicity' in China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17(56): 565–589.
- Barot, Rohit, and John Bird (2001). Racialization: The Genealogy and Critique of a Concept. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24(4): 601–618.
- Bhattacharyya, Gargi (2018). *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival*. London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bovington, Gardner (2002). The Not-So-Silent Majority: Uyghur Resistance to Han Rule in Xinjiang. *Modern China*, 28(1): 39–78.
- Brewer, John (2000). *Ethnography*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Brophy, David (2019). Good and Bad Muslims in Xinjiang. *Made in China Journal*, 4(2): 44–53.
- Byler, Darren (2018). Spirit Breaking: Uyghur Dispossession, Culture Work and Terror Capitalism in a Chinese Global City. Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Gender, University of Washington.
- Byler, Darren (2021). *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City*. Durham, UK: Duke University Press.
- Cerny, Astrid (2010). Going Where the Grass Is Greener: China Kazaks and the Oralman Immigration Policy in Kazakhstan. *Pastoralism*, 1(2): 218–247.
- Chu, Yiting (2018). Constructing *Minzu*: The Representation of *Minzu* and *Zhonghua Minzu* in Chinese Elementary Textbooks. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 39(6): 941–953.



- Clarke, Michael E. (2011). *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia—A History*. New York: Routledge.
- Dantzler, Prentiss A. (2021). The Urban Process under Racial Capitalism: Race, Anti-Blackness, and Capital Accumulation. *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and the City*, 2(2): 113–134.
- Dunford, Michael (2022). The Chinese Path to Common Prosperity. *International Critical Thought*, 12(1): 35–54.
- Federici, Silvia (2014). From Commoning to Debt: Financialization, Microcredit, and the Changing Architecture of Capital Accumulation. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 113(2): 231–244.
- Finley, Joanne S. (2013). *The Art of Symbolic Resistance: Uyghur Identities and Uyghur-Han Relations in Contemporary Xinjiang*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Gans, Herbert J. (2017). Racialization and Racialization Research. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(3): 341–352.
- Gare, Arran (2012). China and the Struggle for Ecological Civilization. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 23(4): 10–26.
- Garner, Steve, and Saher Selod (2015). The Racialization of Muslims: Empirical Studies of Islamophobia. *Critical Sociology*, 41(1): 9–19.
- Gonzalez-Sobrinho, Bianca, and Devon R. Goss (2019). Exploring the Mechanisms of Racialization beyond the Black–White Binary. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(4): 505–510.
- Gravlee, Clarence C. (2009). How Race Becomes Biology: Embodiment of Social Inequality. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 139(1): 47–57.
- Gupta, Pallavi (2022). Broomscapes: Racial Capitalism, Waste, and Caste in Indian Railway Stations. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45(2): 235–256.
- Hall, Stuart (2017). *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Han, Dong (2010). Policing and Racialization of Rural Migrant Workers in Chinese Cities. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(4): 593–610.
- Harvey, David (2003). *The New Imperialism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Hasmath, Reza (2008). The Big Payoff?: Educational and Occupational Attainments of Ethnic Minorities in Beijing. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 20(1): 104–116.
- Hasmath, Reza (2019). What Explains the Rise of Majority–Minority Tensions and Conflict in Xinjiang? *Central Asian Survey*, 38(1): 46–60.
- Hochman, Adam (2019). Racialization: A Defense of the Concept. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(8): 1245–1262.
- Inwood, Joshua F., and Robert A. Yarbrough (2010). Racialized Places, Racialized Bodies: The Impact of Racialization on Individual and Place Identities. *Geojournal*, 75(3): 299–301.
- Kipnis, Andrew (2006). Suzhi: A Keyword Approach. *The China Quarterly*, 186: 295–313.
- Lassiter, Unna, Marcie Griffith, and Jennifer Wolch (2002). Animal Practices and the Racialization of Filipinas in Los Angeles. *Society & Animals*, 10(3): 221–248.
- Leeman, Jennifer (2004). Racializing Language: A History of Linguistic Ideologies in the U.S. Census. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 3(3): 507–534.
- Leong, Nancy (2013). Racial Capitalism. *Harvard Law Review*, 126(8): 2151–2226.
- Liu, Peilin, Tao Qian, Xianhai Huang, and Xuebing Dong (2021). The Meaning, Implementation, and Measurement of Common Prosperity. *Management World*, (8): 117–129.
- Liu, Xinyu (2011). A Kazakh Pastoral Society under the Land System Reforms. PhD Dissertation, Department of Sociology, Jilin University.
- Liu, Zhiqiang (2005). Institution and Inequality: The *bukou* System in China. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 33(1): 133–157.
- Liverman, Diana M., and Silvina Vilas (2006). Neoliberalism and the Environment in Latin America. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 31(1): 327–363.
- Lowe, John, and Eileen Y. Tsang (2017). Disunited in Ethnicity: The Racialization of Chinese Mainlanders in Hong Kong. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 51(2): 137–158.
- Pearson, Margaret, Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S. Tsai (2021). Party-State Capitalism in China. *Current History*, 120(827): 207–213.
- McMillen, Donald H. (1984). Xinjiang and Wang Enmao: New Directions in Power, Policy and Integration? *The China Quarterly*, 99: 569–593.
- McNally, David (2009). From Financial Crisis to World-Slump: Accumulation, Financialisation, and the Global Slowdown. *Historical Materialism*, 17(2): 35–83.
- Melamed, Jodi (2015). Racial Capitalism. *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 1(1): 76–85.
- Pan, Yue (2006). Explain Socialist Ecological Civilization. *Current Thought*, (10):10–8.
- Ptackova, Jarmila (2011). Sedentarisation of Tibetan Nomads in China: Implementation of the Nomadic Settlement Project in the Tibetan Amdo Area; Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces. *Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice*, 1(4), 1–11.

- Ptackova, Jarmila (2012). Implementation of Resettlement Programmes amongst Pastoralist Communities in Eastern Tibet. In Hermann Kreutzmann (Ed.), *Pastoral Practices in High Asia: Agency of 'Development' Effected by Modernisation, Resettlement and Transformation*, pp. 217–234. Heidelberg, DE: Springer.
- Ptackova, Jarmila (2020). *Exile from the Grasslands: Tibetan Herders and Chinese Development Projects*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Peck, Jamie, and Adam Tickell (2002). Neoliberalizing Space. *Antipode*, 34(3): 380–404.
- Roberts, Sean R. (2020). *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Robinson, Cedric (2000). *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. North Carolina, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rustin, Michael (2000). Psychoanalysis, Racism and Anti-Racism. In Michael Rustin (Ed.), *The Good Society and the Inner World*, pp. 183–200. London, UK: Verso.
- Schmidt, Dirk (2009). The Financial Crisis and Its Impact on China. *China Analysis*, 67: 1–4.
- Selod, Saher (2015). Citizenship Denied: The Racialization of Muslim American Men and Women Post-9/11. *Critical Sociology*, 41(1): 77–95.
- Shiva, Vandana (1991). *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*. New York: Zed Books.
- So, Alvin Y., and Yin-Wah Chu (2012). The Transition from Neoliberalism to State Neoliberalism in China at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century. In Chang Kyung-Sup, Ben Fine, and Linda Weiss (Eds.), *Developmental Politics in Transition: The Neoliberal Era and Beyond*, pp. 166–187. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stake, Robert E. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sum, Ngai-Ling (2009). The Production of Hegemonic Policy Discourses: 'Competitiveness' as a Knowledge Brand and Its (Re-) Contextualizations. *Critical Policy Studies*, 3(2): 184–203.
- Vidal-Ortiz, Salvador (2004). On Being a White Person of Color: Using Autoethnography to Understand Puerto Ricans' Racialization. *Qualitative Sociology*, 27(2): 179–203.
- White, Thomas (2020). Domesticating the Belt and Road: Rural Development, Spatial Politics, and Animal Geographies in Inner Mongolia. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 61(1): 13–33.
- Williams, Dee M. (1996). The Barbed Walls of China: A Contemporary Grassland Drama. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 55(3): 665–691.
- Xing, Li (2018). *Mapping China's 'One Belt One Road' Initiative*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yeh, Emily T. (2013). *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Yuan, Qing-Li (1990). Population Changes in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous region (1949-1984). *Central Asian Survey*, 9(1): 49–73.
- Zang, Xiaowai (2016). *Handbook on Ethnic Minorities in China*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Zenz, Adrian (2019). 'Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude': China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang. *Central Asian Survey*, 38(1): 102–128.
- Zenz, Adrian, and James Leibold (2020). Securitizing Xinjiang: Police Recruitment, Informal Policing, and Ethnic Minority Co-Optation. *The China Quarterly*, 242: 324–348.
- Zhang, Quan (2004). *Altay Prefecture Gazette*. Ürümqi: Xinjiang People's Publisher.
- Zhang, Xin (2017). Chinese Capitalism and the Maritime Silk Road: A World-Systems Perspective. *Geopolitics*, 22(2): 310–331.
- Zhu, Yuchao (2011). "Performance Legitimacy" and China's Political Adaptation Strategy. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 16(2): 123–140.

**Yao Qu** is a researcher of the Xinjiang Documentation Project at the University of British Columbia. His research interests include race and ethnicity in China and political economy in Central Asia. Yao received a Bachelor's degree in Communication from Sun Yat-sen University in China and a Master's degree in Sociology from the University of Alberta in Canada.

---

**Cite this article:** Qu, Yao (2024). Racial Capitalism in an Ethnic Minority Border Region: Husbandry Development in Altay Prefecture, Xinjiang, China. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X24000109>