



Gardiner Bovingdon, Speaker, Indiana University,
“Hu Has the Answer to China’s National Question?”
University of Louisville’s Center for Asian Democracy

Review by Kevin Fahey, Political Science MA student

Dr. Gardiner Bovingdon spoke on campus on January 28th about the current predicament facing the Chinese Communist Party with regard to the issues of nationalism and ethnic minorities in the country. Dr. Bovingdon’s talk centered on the Western Province of Xinjiang, but he also spoke of the conflicts going on in Tibet, and Taiwan. The focus of the lecture portion was on current Chinese President Hu Jintao, whose hardline stance in Tibet against the separatist movement has been a model for CCP domestic repression.

He spoke about how the combination of censorship, oppression, surveillance, and propaganda maintain Communist Party control over the state and protect the organs of government from revolutionary change or even political reform. By utilizing propaganda, and the aforementioned coercive methods to crackdown on dissidents, the Chinese government hopes to ‘solve’ its national question, as a single-structure multiethnic country, much of which was only unified under Chinese control by the Qing Dynasty, which ruled from 1644 to 1912. The ‘national question’ was first identified by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson in his idea of self-determination, but was adopted by Marxist-Leninists who believed that the State could solve the nationalist question through tools of control. When even these methods of control did not succeed, the CCP advocated the migration of Han Chinese to culturally different regions in order to populate and dilute the demographics of ethnically different regions.

In Xinjiang, the Uighur minority has responded to Han immigration and state oppression by initiating several large-scale ethnic riots, the most recent of which were in 1997 and 2009. After each wave of rioting and separatism, the Chinese have stepped up crackdowns and tools of repression, including a claim to have installed 40,000 video cameras in Xinjiang’s capitol, Urumchi. While the riots have subsided, there is acknowledged to be anger and resentment simmering close to the surface.

As a result of these policies across the country, Dr. Bovingdon argued that the Chinese government has become brittle, and more susceptible to riots and other problems stemming from its ethnic instability. Coupled with massive modernization and industrialization, the regime is in danger of massive instability and possible collapse. Dr. Bovingdon argued that government institutions in China have not, as socialist ideology proclaims, “solved” the nationalist tendencies of the multiethnic state. Rather, they have exacerbated them and encouraged more tension and fighting.

During the Q&A session, Dr. Bovingdon mentioned that much of his research is concerned with identifying possible motivators for future Uighur-Han conflict. His interviews with Uighurs in the province (before being banned from China in 2005 due to anti-CCP writing) suggest that they have created small, ‘everyday types of resistance’ to their Han superiors, but are unsure how to mobilize given the seeming ‘Panopticon’ of Chinese surveillance and physical presence. Moreover, discontent among even the Han majority population in the urbanizing East of the country are growing, leading to tensions and protests (such as wildcat strikes) even in areas where ethno-nationalism is not a major issue. This may divert CCP resources and make the regime even more brittle. Dr. Bovingdon concluded that nationalism is an ‘uncontrollable beast’ that there is a danger that the CCP will be able to continue to ‘ride the tiger’. In the meantime the ability to control, and the charade of propaganda and coercion can only last so long.