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CHINA'S DE-EXTREMIZATION OF UYGHURS IN XINJIANG

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Before commencing his academic studies, Patrik spent twenty years traveling the world, mainly through the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia, where he was deeply involved in Islamic and Chinese studies. Then, as an engineer he specialized in improving the seismic performance of low-cost housing, training engineers, government officials, and laymen onsite in Turkey, India, Morocco, Iran, Pakistan, and China. More recently, he was an adjunct professor at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, North Korea, where he taught structural engineering and international business. Currently, he is a foreign expert at Peking University, where he conducts research and lectures on issues related to the Middle East and Islamic ethnic groups in China to help bridge ideological divisions between Muslims and non-Muslims.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite numerous economic development campaigns, massive security operations, and intensive ideological education programs in the last 20 years, the Chinese government has failed to achieve the harmonious, multiethnic, and prosperous society that it desires for the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang). Instead, interethnic relations between the Chinese Uyghur ethnic minority and the dominant Han have deteriorated since the early 1990s. Given the failure to achieve a harmonious and prosperous Xinjiang, it is important to question the suitability of the regional security policy being implemented by the Communist Party of China (CPC).

To provide the necessary background to the current sociopolitical situation in Xinjiang, this paper first describes how, between 1990 and 2010, the Chinese government gradually turned Uyghur national identity and Islamic practices into national security threats, i.e., extremized/securitized them. The securitization allowed the CPC to legitimately restrict many of the Uyghurs' cultural and religious rights enshrined in Chapter II, Article 36 of the Constitution of China and protected by Chinese laws.

Then, it reviews the three-year ideological de-extremization campaign¹ that started in 2014, which is the latest government effort to achieve ethnic unity and ensure regional stability in Xinjiang. By using a combination of economic

development incentives and pervasive security measures to support a series of intensive ideological de-extremization education programs (**Figure 1**),² the government is following a carrot-and-stick approach to promoting ethnic unity and Chinese national identity among the Uyghurs. The program seeks to first weaken the Uyghurs' ancestral national identity, which is strongly shaped by Islamic beliefs and practices. For this purpose, numerous grassroots propaganda programs in the form of educational and social activities are used, of which the de-extremization pictorial competitions are a part and subsequently discussed in more detail in this paper—starting with **Figure 1**, which depicts the differences between “extremist” and “de-extremized.” The paintings produced in these competitions provide a useful view of what Beijing wants the Uyghurs to love and to submit to (e.g., China and the CPC), and what it wants them to consider as backward and dangerous threats (e.g., Islamic belief and practices). Numerous economic benefits are offered to those Uyghurs who are willing to submit to the CPC's unconditional authority and to being “Sinicized,” or the process by which China's non-Han Chinese population adopts the majority Han Chinese population's customs and practices.

Finally, this paper seeks to answer two fundamental questions: What is the real purpose of the de-extremization campaign? And will it help improve

interethnic relations and make Xinjiang more prosperous? It finds that Beijing's current labels of *extremism* and *terrorism* in Xinjiang are the result of the CPC's securitization campaign conducted between 1990 and 2010, which slowly turned Uyghur nationalism and numerous Islamic practices into existential threats. Hence, the de-extremization campaign may not be aimed at fighting international Islamic terrorism, as stated by the CPC, but rather at forcefully assimilating the Uyghur community into the larger Chinese nation, which the campaign will fail to do. While the majority of Uyghurs might temporarily yield to Beijing's Sinification campaign, it can be expected that a significant minority among them will resist it and adopt a more radicalized stance against the Chinese state. Ultimately, the de-extremization campaign will produce a hopeless and angry group of Uyghurs that will undermine Xinjiang's long-term security, stability, and development.

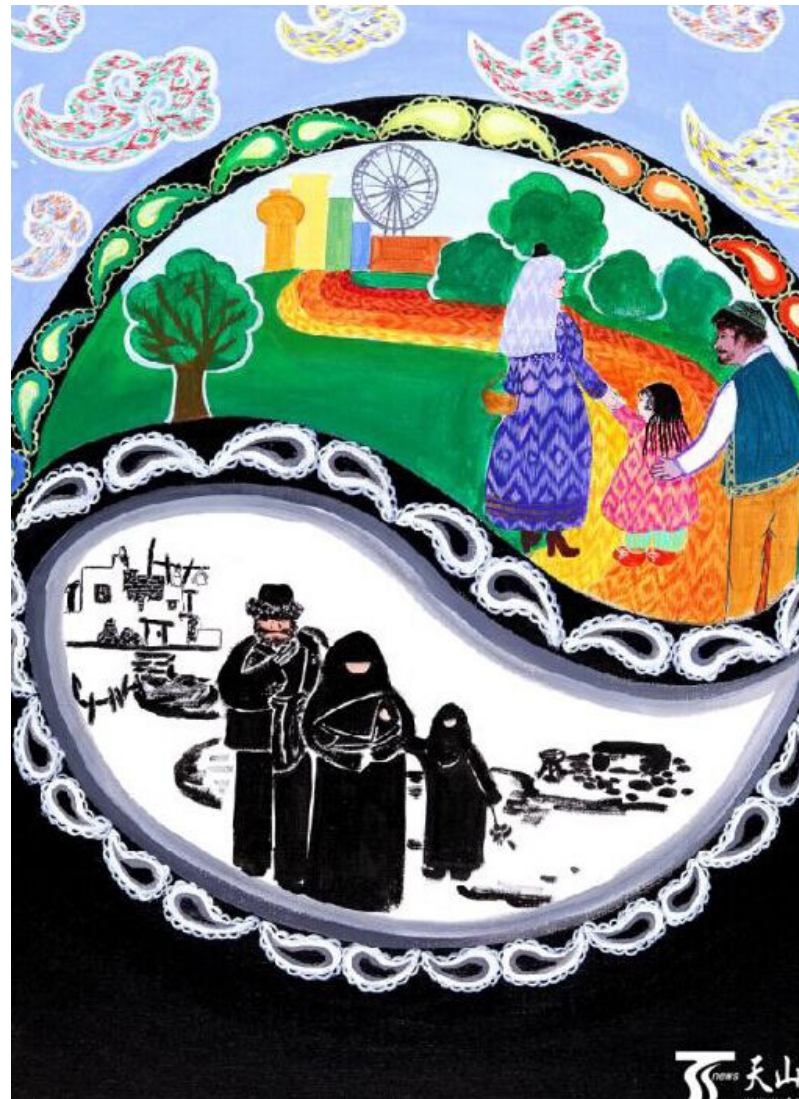


Figure 1: "Extremist" (bottom) and "de-extremized" family.

EXTREMIZING UYGHURS' NATIONAL IDENTITY AND ISLAMIC PRACTICES

After the repressive policies and measures implemented during the years of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, the Chinese government followed a minorities-friendly strategy in the 1980s that aimed to integrate minorities within the larger multiethnic Chinese nation. These policies aimed to improve the overall status of China's 55 ethnic minorities by allowing them to recover their cultural, social, and religious traditions. Uyghurs in Xinjiang were allowed to build mosques, publish religious books, open Islamic schools, and manage their religious and cultural affairs with only limited intervention by the government.³ As a result, interethnic relations in Xinjiang in the 1980s were relatively friendly because the ethnic minorities enjoyed increasing economic and political empowerment, as well as cultural and religious freedoms.

In the early 1990s, Beijing realized that instead of achieving the integration of the Uyghurs, its approach of the 1980s had revived their distinct national identity and religious practices, which resulted in increased Uyghur resistance to being part of the Chinese state-nation.⁴ The seriousness of these nationalist sentiments was reflected in violent events, such as the Baren uprising in 1990, which saw armed Uyghurs attack government offices and a police station.⁵ These disturbances combined

with regional events, including the defeat of the Soviet Army by the Mujahideen and the collapse of the USSR, to drive anxiety regarding the territorial integrity of the nation among China's leadership.

To counter growing Uyghur nationalism, Beijing decided to end the integrationist approach it followed in the 1980s and adopt an assimilationist one. For this purpose, the CPC increasingly restrained expressions of Uyghur ethnic identity and Islamic practices, and implemented numerous extraordinary measures and policies that seemed to indiscriminately target crime, nationalism, religious activities, and interethnic socioeconomic tensions.⁶ Additionally, to minimize the support coming from the Uyghurs' ethnic and religious brethren in Central Asia, Beijing adopted a very active economic and diplomatic integration strategy with its northeastern neighbors. By offering to advantageously settle territorial disputes and initiate lucrative economic relations, Beijing obtained support for their fight against Uyghur nationalists from numerous countries bordering Xinjiang, such as Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.⁷

Beijing's assimilationist and isolationist strategy resulted in an increasing general resentment and frustration among the Uyghurs. The sources of the tensions were, and still are, numerous and complex:

massive Han immigration, perceived sociopolitical and economic discrimination against the Uyghurs, and a drastic reduction of the Uyghurs' cultural and religious freedoms, amongst others. The interethnic tensions grew stronger over time, resulting in numerous violent acts that peaked with the Yili riots in 1997. Beijing's answer to this increase in Uyghur resistance was dominated by a series of security campaigns, such as the "100-Day Crackdown Campaign" in January 1999, the "General Campaign Against Terrorism" that started in April 1999, and a new "Strike Hard Campaign" initiated in April 2001.⁸

To reduce the interethnic tension between Uyghur and Han, the Chinese government decided to weaken the Uyghurs' national identity by isolating them from their cultural heritage and strictly limiting their Islamic beliefs and practices, such as praying, fasting, and learning about Islam. Given the constitutional and legal protections for both ethnic identity and religious practices, Beijing had to turn them first into national security threats to be able to legitimize the imposition of restrictions on them.

Beijing followed a strategy of "politics of unease" to discursively construct a "patchwork of insecurities"⁹ to securitize Uyghur nationalism and some Islamic practices. Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the CPC used its monopoly on the Chinese media to argue¹⁰ that Xinjiang's tensions were the work of the foreign-incited "three forces"—religious extremism, ethnic separatism, and international terrorism—and gradually turned them into national and regional security threats. Then, after deadly riots in Urumqi

on July 5 and 7, 2009, Beijing continued to insist that the conflicts were exclusively the work of international terrorist forces and, consequently, argued that they needed to be fought within the framework of the global "war on terrorism." By 2010, almost any attempt by Uyghurs to preserve their ethnic identity and religious practices was seen by Beijing as "unpatriotic" and a threat to the motherland's territorial integrity.¹¹ It would seem that the CPC often confuses any disagreement with their ideology and policies as a threat to public order and security.

Ultimately, Beijing's security discourse turned what had been described as a political, social, and ideological conflict in 1990 into one of national and international security that allegedly needed to be fought in the context of the international war on terrorism. Xinjiang's sociopolitical, economic, and religious tensions were securitized. Then, as national security threats, they were often dealt with by hard security measures that did not address the root causes of the tensions, but rather aimed to eliminate dissent by force.

In this atmosphere of a national security emergency, Beijing is implementing a de-extremizing program aimed at facilitating the assimilation of the Uyghurs within the common Chinese national identity. This program is part of a broader campaign that also aims to improve the Uyghurs' livelihoods, build interethnic relations, and secure the social stability needed to achieve Xinjiang's development.

DE-EXTREMIZING UYGHURS: CARROT-AND-STICK APPROACH

To reduce the growing interethnic tensions, reinforce ethnic unity, and achieve social stability in Xinjiang, the CPC uses three strategies: strengthening the local security apparatus, improving the Uyghurs' livelihoods, and weakening their distinct ethnic identity and religious beliefs. In recent years, the security apparatus has been massively expanded and made more effective when countering what the government labels as a threat posed by international terrorism in Xinjiang. However, after extensive research conducted in the region, it became clear that the main task of Xinjiang's security apparatus is to manage domestic political dissent and social unrest, as well as any alleged international terrorist threats. As for Beijing's efforts to improve the Uyghurs' livelihoods, the facts on the ground confirm that these efforts are significant and successful.

Improving Uyghurs' livelihoods¹²

Following President Xi's order to achieve long-term stability in Xinjiang, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Party Committee decided in 2014 to conduct the "Visiting, Improving People's Livelihood, and Gaining Their Hearts" campaign, which has the ultimate goal of the de-extremization of the Uyghur population by improving their living

standards. Based on the CPC's requirements,¹³ this three-year campaign focuses on promoting interethnic harmony by providing economic incentives. As part of this massive campaign, a total of over 200,000 government officials, many from urban areas, are sent to live and do grassroots work in villages for one year. One of the main focuses of this campaign is the Uyghur population in South Xinjiang because it is the region where most social unrest has happened in recent years; it is also the least-developed in Xinjiang.

During 2015, the second year of the campaign, the Xinjiang Autonomous Party Commission provided 4.77 billion yuan (\$737 million) to carry out livelihood improvement projects. Half a million yuan was invested in each of the 9,611 selected villages¹⁴ through one or several of Xinjiang's 25 governmental organizations. A variety of projects benefited from this investment, including infrastructure and agricultural production improvement, social services, and education.¹⁵ Significant positive results were already announced in October 2015, when Zhang Chunxian, the CPC's Xinjiang Party Secretary, declared, "Xinjiang's social stability and the motherland's security were ensured thanks to the 'Visiting, Improving People's Livelihood, and Gaining Their Hearts' campaign, which is tightly uniting all ethnic masses."¹⁶ It is

true that these livelihood improvement projects are steadily improving the livelihoods of the Uyghurs living in South Xinjiang via more employment opportunities, better infrastructure, more schools and hospitals, and an overall improvement in social services.¹⁷

However, the government's inherent duty to improve its people's livelihoods is presented in Xinjiang as a reward to the Uyghur population for their submission to Chinese rule. By tightly integrating economic development with extensive ideological propaganda education programs and activities, economic benefits are used to incentivize the acceptance of the CPC's ideology and leadership among the Uyghurs. Ultimately, the Uyghurs' right to see their livelihoods improved comes with an unusual price tag attached: to forgo many of their cultural and religious rights, accept China as the motherland, and submit to the CPC as the sole authority.

In addition, the massive security apparatus and the livelihood improvement projects are tightly interwoven with the third strategy that Beijing uses to eliminate what it perceives as threats and achieve social stability in Xinjiang: the implementation of programs aimed at weakening the Uyghurs' ethnic identity and religious beliefs.

De-extremization campaign: Purpose, structure, and methods of operation

The threat from Xinjiang that Beijing perceives and what Beijing threatens in Xinjiang has not changed much since the 1950s. The propaganda poster from 1958 (**Figure 2**) illustrates how motherland unity, ethnic unity, and the party's leadership needed to be protected by fighting against the regional ethnic separatists' efforts. If we look at the poster in more detail (**Figure 3**), we can see that the actual threat is Uyghur separatism, which itself is the product of the Uyghurs feeling that they are not part of the Chinese state-nation because of their distinct national identity.



Figure 2: Poster describing the threats in Xinjiang in 1958.

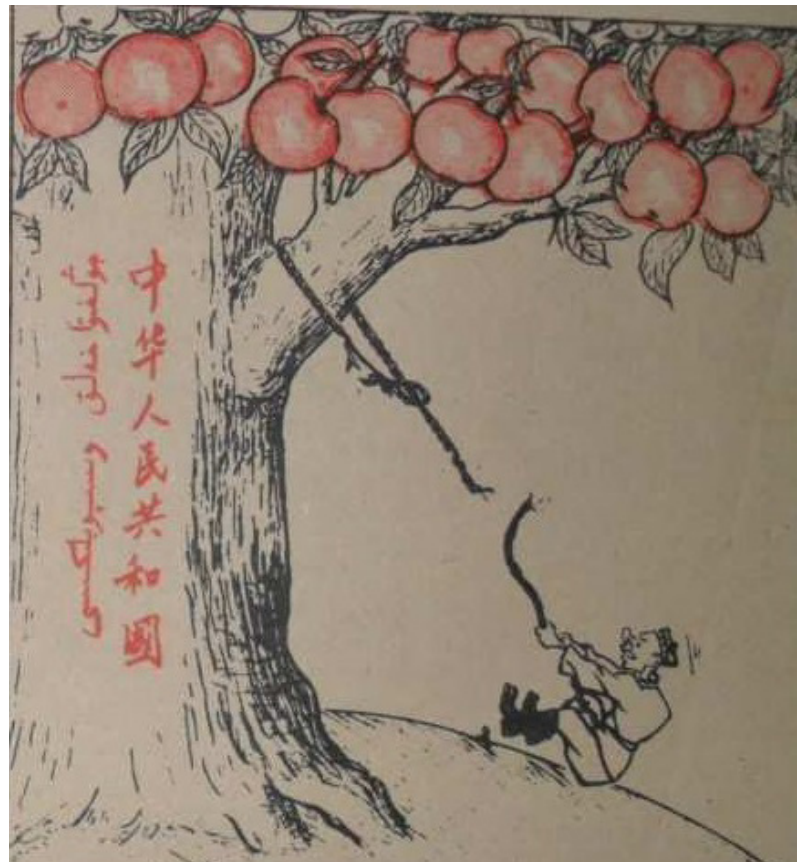


Figure 3: Uyghur separatism—the main threat.

Given that the Uyghurs' national identity is strongly shaped by Islam, the CPC considers their Islamic beliefs as existential threats, too. The extent to which religion is perceived by Beijing as an existential threat can be seen from President Jiang Zemin's statements in 1996, when he voiced his concern about Xinjiang's volatile situation and blamed it on religious beliefs and practices:

Religion is a very serious issue, because it affects the whole country's social stability and unity, challenges the construction of the desired socialist material and spiritual civilization, and also is part of the struggle between peaceful evolution and anti-peaceful evolution.¹⁸

By the early 2000s, Beijing framed Xinjiang's interethnic sociopolitical, religious, and economic tensions as part of an international terrorist threat to China's national security and gathered them under the label of the "three (evil) forces": (Uyghur) separatism, (Islamic) religious extremism, and (Islamic) terrorism. Given that Uyghur separatism is driven by them having a distinct national identity, and that their national identity is strongly influenced by Islam, eliminating Islamic beliefs was expected to eliminate the "three forces" and significantly facilitate the process of Uyghurs accepting the Chinese identity, i.e., Uyghur Sinification.

For the purpose of legally undermining Islamic practices, religious extremism was equated to illegal religious activities, and these were blamed for being the root cause of most of the threats that loomed over Xinjiang's prosperity. In 2013, the Xinjiang Party Committee stated:

Religious extremism and illegal religious activities are the soil from which the three forces grow, they give birth to ethnic separatism and violent terrorism, and they are the poison that severely damages Xinjiang's social stability.¹⁹

A problem with Beijing's label of religious extremism is that in Xinjiang it includes common practices followed by moderate Muslims in other

provinces in China and elsewhere in the world. It can include activities such as praying, wearing Islamic headscarves, growing beards, learning about Islam, fasting, deciding not to drink alcohol, and even going to mosques. To provide a legal framework for these restrictive measures of questionable constitutionality and legality, the CPC passed numerous laws that have made any religious activity that is not explicitly legal, illegal.²⁰

The legalistic approach to fight Islamic beliefs and practices in Xinjiang was started in the mid-1990s. Since then, for the purpose of protecting China from the threat that religion represents, the authorities in Xinjiang have frequently released regulations and policies tightening the management of "extremist" religious activities in Xinjiang (**Figure 4**).

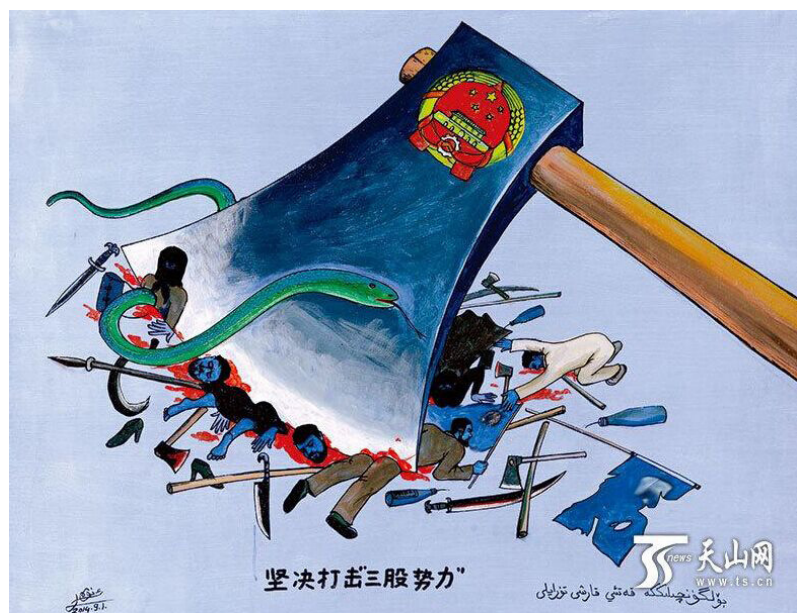


Figure 4: Destroying the three forces by the law.

The number of policies, regulations, and laws produced by the Chinese government to regulate religious activities in Xinjiang have accelerated in recent years, with the most recent ones being:

- Work instructions to legally govern illegal religious activities and prevent the permeation of religious extremism,²¹
- Instructions to further reinforce and complete work on Islam,²² Xinjiang's religious affairs regulations,²³ and
- The regulation about banning the wearing of veil and robe in public in Urumqi.²⁴

This barrage of new policies and regulations has restricted Islamic practices in Xinjiang far beyond the limits imposed on other regions with large Muslim populations, such as in Qinghai, Ningxia, and Gansu.

In Xinjiang, any religious practice that is not explicitly legal is illegal, in contrast to the usual approach to manage religious activities, where the illegal activities are listed. According to Paper No.11:

Normal religious activities are those that follow the national constitution, law, policies and local regulations; any other religious activities which violated these laws and regulations are illegal religious activities.²⁵

This regulation restricts the practice of legal religious activities to only officially sanctioned mosques. Hence, religious activities, such as praying, reading the Qur'an, and learning or teaching about Islam in public or at home are considered illegal. In addition, anyone under the age of 18 is not allowed to go to mosques, and parents and teachers must ensure that they do not practice or learn about religion.²⁶

As a result, religious practices that are part of a moderate Muslim's daily practices have been rendered illegal and labeled as religious extremism. For example, the poster shown in **Figure 5**, "Five Forms of Informal Activities," depicts five behaviors that China has linked to religious extremism and made illegal: the wearing of traditional Islamic dress, headscarves,²⁷ and veils; young men growing beards; and wearing clothes with depictions



Figure 5: "Five Forms of Informal Activities."

of the moon and stars. In addition to tightly regulating what legal religious activities are, the new legislation²⁸ also provides a specific legal framework to legitimize the government's efforts to de-extremize religious beliefs, which in Xinjiang is done via ideological indoctrination programs.

Ideological indoctrination to spread and strengthen a common Chinese identity is neither a new phenomenon, nor is it unique to Xinjiang. However, in Xinjiang this is done by drastically weakening



Figure 6: The Soil Improvement Plan is a people's war against evil.

Islamic beliefs and practices, and by expecting that all Uyghurs participate in a “people’s war”²⁹ against the alleged existential threat that religious extremism poses. One of the programs implemented for this purpose is the “Soil Improvement Plan”^{30,31} (**Figure 6**). This program was designed to help Uyghurs in rural areas overcome poverty and ignorance that facilitates the spread of religious extremism, and to provide Uyghur cadres with the necessary skills to clarify “people’s ideological confusion.”³² This was to be achieved by visiting villagers, improving their livelihoods, and gaining their hearts.³³ The titles of the four phases of implementation depict in a very visual way how the de-extremization process that the CPC has in mind should work:

1. “Dig deep and loosen soil,” which indicates the need to conduct a full investigation to assess what the actual situation is.
2. “Clear the weeds,” which refers to eliminating extremists and extremist ideas.
3. “Intensive cultivation,” which aims at promoting “anti-violence, pro-legality, and pro-order.”³⁴

4. “Improve the environment,” which sets the goal of making real efforts to improve people’s livelihoods.³⁵

To achieve these ambitious goals, large numbers of cadres, teachers, and religious leaders have received intensive political-ideological training. Chinese officials, mostly party members, were trained to be politically and ideologically robust, and taught to lead by example by being the first ones to implement the changes that they promoted among the people (**Figure 7**). To incentivize people to follow their example, cadres have been empowered to improve people’s livelihoods by implementing projects that would benefit government-friendly individuals and communities. Government-friendly individuals are Uyghurs who are willing to sign a letter of commitment to the Chinese government, participate in de-extremization classes and activities, publicly stand by the CPC, and identify themselves as proud citizens of the People’s Republic of China.³⁶ Teachers, the second group of actors in the de-extremization program, are not only trained to warn their Muslim students not to join any sort of religious activities, but to outright promote atheism. Joining religious activities is equated to “playing with fire” (**Figure 8**).



Figure 7: “People’s war”—everyone should participate.



Figure 8: “Participating in extremist activities is playing with fire.”

The third group, religious leaders, such as Imams, are expected to promote the love of China above anything else and respect for the CPC as the highest authority. In addition, they have to present Islam as a religion that does not have a role to play in the social and political lives of people, as well as interpret the Qur’an and Islamic teachings in such a way that they promote ethnic unity, appreciation of communism, and submission to the CPC. They are even forced to support the government’s religious policies and regulations that often blatantly contravene Islamic ones. More importantly, they are asked to label many common and moderated religious practices as religious extremism, or even as terrorism. Finally, to show their love and submission to the Chinese authorities, religious leaders are made, for example, to lead Chinese dances in public. Dancing in front of a crowd is deeply embarrassing and demeaning for these religious leaders, and it causes anger among the Uyghur population.

To support the work of government officials, teachers, and religious leaders, numerous grassroots, ideological propaganda campaigns are organized along with an extensive campaign to improve people’s lives. These campaigns are guided by Xi Jinping and Zhang Chunxian’s speeches,³⁷ and

are supported by extensive ideological education and propaganda materials. More than 350 million propaganda pieces (posters, CDs, booklets, etc.) were published and distributed by Xinjiang’s authorities from 2014–15.³⁸ The six stated aims of the grassroots ideological campaigns include reasserting the deep relationship between the CPC and the Chinese people, enhancing the grassroots work and effectiveness of the CPC, improving people’s livelihoods, achieving ethnic unity and social stability, adapting religious activities to modern culture, and educating people to prevent the spreading of religious extremism/terrorism.³⁹ One of the most visible grassroots propaganda activities are the Xinjiang pictorial competitions that are held regularly in villages and towns.⁴⁰

Example of a grassroots campaign: Pictorial competitions

During these pictorial competitions, Uyghur villagers are encouraged to use their traditional painting style and colors to depict the theme of religious de-extremization. These paintings are



Figure 9: “The problem of illegal religious activities.”

then shown on official websites and newspapers in Xinjiang to showcase Uyghur support for the Chinese government and its policies.

Another central topic of the de-extremization painting competitions is showing the collective responsibility for the fight against religious extremism, i.e., the alleged fight against religious extremism is a “people’s war.” The participation in this war is not voluntary; everyone is forced to participate, and those reluctant to do so could lose their jobs or be sent to ideological training camps or prison. If the person refusing to participate is a CPC cadre, then, as it was during the Qing Dynasty, he and his extended family will be punished. Party members are required to take the lead in carrying out the de-extremization campaign. For example, officials in Aksu are required to sign an agreement that holds them accountable for ensuring that their families and relatives will not participate in illegal religious activities.⁴¹

Women who refuse to remove their traditional headscarf (**Figure 11**) are sent to ideological training



Figure 10: “Evil, ugly, black Islamic clothes.”



Figure 11: Shaming a woman because of her Islamic dress.

programs or jailed. Law abiders have a duty to identify individuals who could be involved with the three evil forces (separatism, extremism, and terrorism). Refusing to drink alcohol, not being interested in becoming a CPC member, and not being an atheist are all reasons for suspecting someone of being a religious extremist, and people have the duty of informing government officials.

As discussed above, what Beijing labels as “extremism” and “terrorism” in Xinjiang are the outcomes of the success of the securitization campaign that convinced its main audience, the Han, that Uyghur nationalism and Islamic practices represented existential threats to China. This allowed the CPC to legitimize the implementation of numerous de-extremization programs that are allegedly aimed at fighting religious extremism and terrorist activities. These programs have a legal framework, supported with numerous economic incentives and ideological indoctrination programs, and they are enforced with the threat of strict punitive measures. Two questions remain about these programs: What is their actual purpose? And will they be successful?

QUESTIONING THE DE-EXTREMIZATION PROGRAMS

A carrot-and-stick approach used by the CPC attempts to coerce and incentivize the Uyghurs to shed their national identity and promote Chinese national identity and the CPC's leadership. Beijing's self-proclaimed objectives of their management of religious affairs in Xinjiang are to "protect legal activities, stop illegal activities, suppress extremism, and hit crime."⁴² While these objectives might seem commendable, they are questionable because of what Beijing labels as legal versus illegal, and normal versus extreme.

A closer look at the regulations, policies, and laws exposes the fact that the objective of Beijing's de-extremization campaign in Xinjiang is not, as it argues, to fight against an alleged existential threat posed by international Islamic terrorism. Instead, it is aimed at erasing the Uyghur way of life and, in turn, transforming them into patriotic "cultural Muslims,"⁴³ who love China above all and fully submit to the leadership of the CPC.

In addition, the CPC's use of the "extremist" label is not accurate because it includes numerous moderate Islamic practices, such as dressing in accordance with Islamic norms, praying, learning about Islam and the Qur'an, performing the Hajj, growing a beard, and not drinking alcohol. While these practices are labeled as extremist and have been

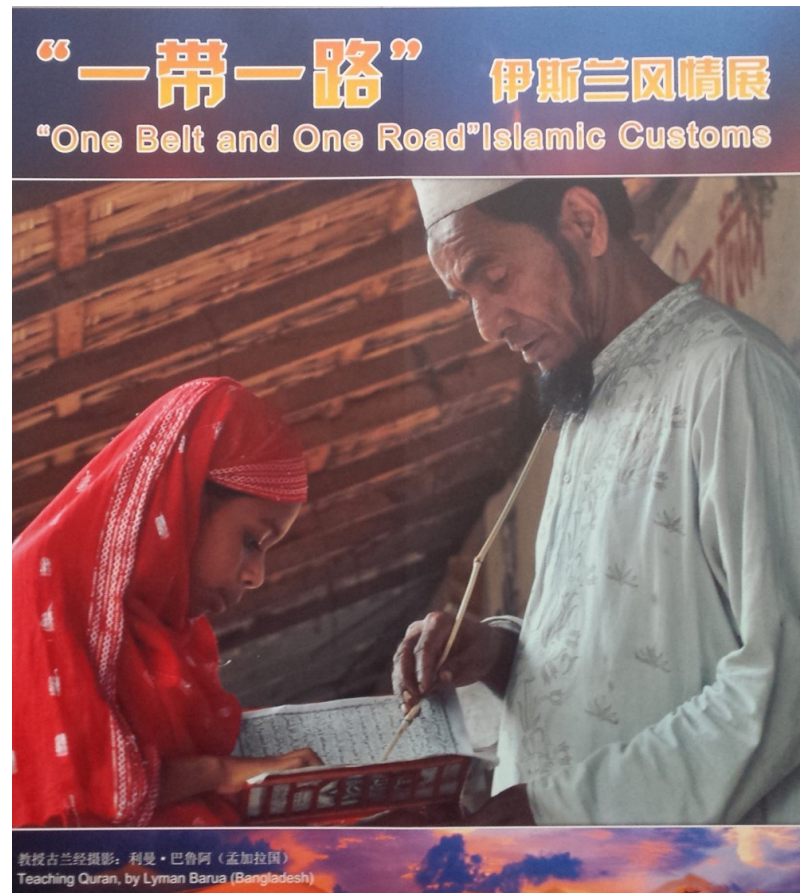


Figure 12: Teaching the Qur'an to children.



Figure 13: CPC welcomes traditional Islamic dress.

made illegal in Xinjiang, they are seen as moderate and legal in other Chinese provinces with large Muslim minorities, such as Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai. Moreover, Beijing depicts them favorably when they are practiced outside Chinese borders. This dual standard in labeling religious activities as legal or illegal, and as normal or extreme is exposed in the display of a series of large posters promoting President Xi’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative in the Beijing Capital Airport. Among these posters (**Figure 12**), we can see one that favorably depicts an Islamic teacher teaching the Qur’an to a young girl wearing a hijab: three illegal extremist activities in Xinjiang. It is interesting to note that Xinjiang is President Xi’s core region for his “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

Another relevant poster shows a young lady dressed in traditional Islamic clothes (**Figure 13**). Again, this would be unthinkable in Xinjiang, where wearing

such clothes is also labeled as religious extremism and would result in immediate detention of the person (**Figure 14**).

These double standards that are used to grant access to constitutionally enshrined cultural and religious rights indisputably discriminate against the Uyghurs and will result in long-term trouble for Xinjiang.

It is the opinion of the author that the de-extremization programs contravene Chinese laws because their final aim is to forcefully assimilate, and not integrate, the Uyghurs into the larger Chinese family. Additionally, Uyghur assimilation is not only a great loss for the Uyghurs, but detrimental for the Chinese state too, both domestically and internationally. At the domestic level, an undesirable outcome of the Uyghurs’ assimilation is the potential deterioration of the current, relatively friendly relationship between the Hui, the largest Muslim minority in China, and the CPC. With the Hui community experiencing a strong Islamic revival all over China, their Chinese and ethnic identities will gradually fade away and be replaced by an increasingly strong Muslim identity, in which ethnic and national identities are irrelevant. Beijing’s injustices committed against their Uyghur brethren will not go unnoticed by the Hui, and will likely result in them siding with the Uyghurs in their opposition to the Chinese government.



Figure 14: In Xinjiang, an Islamic headscarf relates to religious extremism.

More important and measurable are the detrimental effects that the Uyghur assimilation will have on the international arena. This is because their assimilation will result in them losing their fluency in the Uyghur language and familiarity with Islamic practices—both invaluable when it comes to international relations. The Uyghur language and religious identity are two precious assets that can greatly facilitate China’s political, economic, and social exchanges with Central Asian republics and countries with a strong Islamic influence. Additionally, Beijing’s discriminatory treatment of the Uyghurs, especially when it concerns moderate

Islamic practices, can be effectively used against China’s international interests and disputes. A wide range of issues could be adversely affected, from hampering trade with Islamic countries, to tarnishing China’s image, and even complicating territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The reason why abusing the Uyghurs’ religious rights could adversely affect these disputes is that three countries—Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia—confronting China have Muslim majority populations that are susceptible to being angered by the CPC’s mistreatment of Muslims in Xinjiang.

Notes

¹ Xinjiang Economic News, “Soil improvement plan; the battle of de-extremization.” 2015-01-26

² All the paintings shown in this paper were produced in the Xinjiang Pictorial Competition, 2015.

³ MEYER, Patrik (2012). *Governing Muslim Minorities as Security Threats: The Case of the Uyghurs and the Concept of a New Chinese Nation*. PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge. Page 63.

⁴ RUDELSON, J. & JANKOWIAK, W. (2004). *Acculturation and Resistance: Xinjiang Identities in Flux*. IN STARR, F. (Ed.) *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*. New York, M. E. Sharpe. Page 301.

⁵ Xinjiang Daily (1990). *Firmly support the punishment of the counterrevolutionary rioters to guarantee the long-term stability*. 27-04-1990 ed. Urumqi.

⁶ MEYER, Patrik (2012). *Governing Muslim Minorities as Security Threats: The Case of the Uyghurs and the Concept of a New Chinese Nation*. PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge. Page 64.

⁷ Reuters, *Pakistan says will help China fight Xinjiang militants*, 2014.11.08

⁸ CASTETS, R. (2003). *The Uyghurs in Xinjiang - The Malaise Grows*. *China Perspectives*, 111-112.

⁹ HUYSMANS, J. & BUONFINO, A. (2008). *Politics of Exception and Unease: Immigration, Asylum and Terrorism in Parliamentary Debates in the UK*. *Political Studies*, 56, 766-788.

¹⁰ XINHUA (2001) *Shanghai convention of hitting terrorism, separatism and extremism (Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan)*. Xinhua. 15-06-2001 ed.

¹¹ MEYER, Patrik (2012). *Governing Muslim Minorities as Security Threats: The Case of the*

Uyghurs and the Concept of a New Chinese Nation. PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge. Page 64.

¹² Professor Xu Jiaopin, a Xinjiang expert at the Central Party School, believes that what is most relevant for ethnic minority farmers is improving their livelihood, and not preserving their ethnic identity and religious practices. Hence, he argues that helping farmers in South Xinjiang (the most rural region in Xinjiang) improve their harvests and become wealthier will greatly facilitate their acceptance of the leadership of the CPC and reduce their support for the *three forces* (extremism, separatism, terrorism). China Economic Daily, Cao Xu, *Xinjiang' Visiting, Improving People's Livelihood, and Gaining their Hearts Campaign: 200,000 Cadres go Working in Countryside*, (探访新疆访惠聚: 20万机关干部下乡住村路), 2015.10.20.

¹³ China Economic Daily, Cao Xu, *Xinjiang' Visiting, Improving People's Livelihood, and Gaining their Hearts Campaign: 200,000 Cadres go Working in Countryside*, (探访新疆访惠聚: 20万机关干部下乡住村路), 2015-10-20.

¹⁴ Leading office of “Visiting, Improving People's Livelihood, and Gaining their Hearts” activities, *5 Billion Yuan of Grassroots Level Livelihood Projects Launched*, (自治区访汇聚活动50亿村级惠民生工程首批项目启动实施), 2015.05.25

¹⁵ For example, a budget of 107 million yuan was released by the Xinjiang Civil Affairs Department in October 2015 for the assistance of poor families, the improvement of health care, and the construction of a day care center for the elderly. These projects are being implemented by five different departments: Xinjiang Civil Affairs Department, Education Department, Department of Land and Resources, Xinjiang Economic and Information Technology Committee, and Transportation Department. This specific project involves 205 villages from 12 regions in Xinjiang. Additionally, the Department of Education has a budget of 108 million yuan for the construction of a bi-lingual kindergarten that covers

104 villages in Xinjiang. Also, the Transportation Department is spending 392 million yuan on the construction of rural roads affecting 683 villages. Finally, the Department of Land and Resources is spending 249 million yuan on land reclamation, farmland water conservancy, and forest protection. Leading office of “Visiting, Improving People’s Livelihood, and Gaining their Hearts” activities, *The fifth Group of Grassroots Level Livelihood Projects Confirmed*, (自治区访汇聚活动2015年村级惠民生5批工程确认实施), 2015.10.20.

¹⁶ Zhang Chunxian’s speech at the celebration gala of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region’s sixtieth anniversary on October 1st 2015.

¹⁷ It must be noted that these improvements have also resulted in increased interethnic tensions because the Uyghurs feel that the Han benefit from them disproportionately.

¹⁸ XD (1996f). Follow the Party’s Religious policies and Restrict any Illegal Religious Activities, (执行党的宗教政策, 制止非法宗教活动). *Xinjiang Daily*. 07.05.1996 ed. Urumqi.

¹⁹ Xinjiang Autonomy Party Committee and Xinjiang Autonomous Government, *Work Instructions to Legally Govern Illegal Religious Activities and Prevent the Permeation of Religious Extremism, in short, Autonomous Paper No.11*, (关于进一步依法治理非法宗教活动遏制宗教极端思想渗透工作的若干指导意见), 2013.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Xinjiang Autonomy Party Committee and Xinjiang Autonomous Government, *Work Instructions to Legally Govern Illegal Religious Activities and Prevent the Permeation of Religious Extremism, in short, Autonomous Paper No.11*, (关于进一步依法治理非法宗教活动遏制宗教极端思想渗透工作的若干指导意见), 2013.

²² Xinjiang Autonomy Party Committee and Xinjiang Autonomous Government, *Instructions to Further Reinforce and Improve Work of Islam, in short,*

Autonomous Paper No. 28, (关于进一步加强和完善伊斯兰工作的若干意见), 2014.

²³ Standing Committee of the 12th People’s Congress of Xinjiang, *Xinjiang’s Religious Affairs Regulations*, (新疆宗教事务条例), 2014.11.28.

²⁴ Standing Committee of the 12th People’s Congress of Xinjiang, *The Regulation about Banning Wearing of Veil and Robe in Public in Urumqi*, (乌鲁木齐市公共场所关于禁止穿戴蒙面罩袍的规定), 2015.01.10.

²⁵ Autonomous Paper No. 11, Article 18.

²⁶ Standing Committee of the 12th People’s Congress of Xinjiang, *Xinjiang’s Religious Affairs Regulations*, (新疆宗教事务条例), 2014.11.28.

²⁷ There are numerous pamphlets arguing that not wearing the Islamic headscarf will make females happier and weaken their religious extremism. For example: 2015.12.11, 住村故事, 寻找笑脸中的变化, Leading office of “Visiting, Improving People’s Livelihood, and Gaining their Hearts” activities.

²⁸ Autonomous Papers Nos. 11 and 28.

²⁹ The “People’s War” was a campaign that the Chinese government implemented in the mid-1990s in which every individual was expected to contribute to improving the security of Xinjiang by “spying” on each other.

³⁰ Xinjiang Economic News, ‘Soil Improvement Plan’ Beginning of the “De-extremization” Battle, (土壤改良计划打响去极端化攻坚战), 2015.01.26.

³¹ Legal Daily, ‘Soil Improvement Plan’ Effectively Grassroots Stability, (土壤改良计划有效维护基层稳定), 2015.09.14.

³² Department of Justice of Xinjiang conducted an investigation in eight villages located in the Hetian region (South Xinjiang) and found that religious extremism had been able to spread because the villagers were very poor and ignorant. In addition, local officials were said not to have the skills to

clarify “people’s ideological confusion.” Legal Daily, ‘Soil Improvement Plan’ Effectively Grassroots Stability, (土壤改良计划有效维护基层稳定), 2015.09.14.

³³ Legal Daily, ‘Soil Improvement Plan’ Effectively Grassroots Stability, (土壤改良计划有效维护基层稳定), 2015.09.14.

³⁴ Measures for Xinjiang issue, the concept was first raised by Zhang Chunxian, Party Secretary of Xinjiang in the 4th session of the 11th National People’s Congress on March 5, 2011.

³⁵ Legal Daily, ‘Soil Improvement Plan’ Effectively Grassroots Stability, (土壤改良计划有效维护基层稳定), 2015.09.14.

³⁶ Xinjiang Daily, Adhere to ‘Five Identities’ and Build Beautiful Homeland Together, (坚持五个认同, 同心同德建设美好家园), 2015.06.26.

³⁷ General office of Xinjiang Party Commission, Content Index of Propaganda Materials of Visiting, Improving People’s Livelihood and Gaining their Hearts Activities, (自治区访惠聚活动宣传资料学习内容索引), 2014.12.23.

³⁸ Xinjiang Daily, A General Description of Xinjiang Propaganda Products, (弘扬现代文化凝聚社会正能量 ——我区加强宣传文化产品供给综述), 2015.08.10.

³⁹ China Economic Daily, Cao Xu, Xinjiang’ Visiting, Improving People’s Livelihood, and Gaining their Hearts Activities: 200,000 Cadres Go Working in Countryside, (探访新疆访惠聚: 20万机关干部下乡住村路), 2015.10.20.

⁴⁰ Yaxin Net, Xinjiang De-extremization Pictorials are Popular, (去极端化”新疆农民画作品受观众热评), 2014.11.23.

⁴¹ The Commission for Discipline Inspection in Aksu: “Several Regulations about Party Members Taking Lead to Implement De-extremization Activities in Aksu, 2015.”

⁴² Announced during the Second Xinjiang Work Seminar of State Council in May 28-29, 2014.

⁴³ “Cultural Muslim,” a concept introduced and discussed by the author in his PhD thesis.



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