

“Illegal Religious Activities” and Counter-Terrorism in China*

Chi Zhang 

Independent scholar

Abstract: The fight against terrorism prompts governments to differentiate between “good” religious practices and the “bad” ones. The simplistic dichotomy of “good” and “bad” Muslims has led to a cascade of criticism, but a fallacy underlying this dualism remains underexplored. This paper examines the “no true Scotsman” fallacy that is prevalent in the political discourse surrounding terrorism and religion. It argues that China’s attempt to counteract the essentialist assumption about Uyghurs leads to a reinforced “good-versus-bad” dichotomous categorization of Muslims, reflected in the binary of “normal” and “illegal” in China’s religious policy. This is a major contribution to the existing literature on politics and religion because, theoretically, this paper applies the “no true Scotsman” fallacy and “good” and “bad” Muslims dichotomy to explain the relationship between politics and religion; empirically, it provides a rich overview of the political nature of religious policy in China.

INTRODUCTION

While terrorists, politicians, and so-called “modest” Muslims have categorically different agendas, they share one thing in common. In publicizing their positions to the general public, they often rest their arguments upon different assumptions about what Islam *truly* is, or how a *true* Muslim should behave. Some fundamentalists seek to re-establish what they believe to be *true* religion (Roy 1994). Jacoby (2019) illustrates how the self-proclaimed Islamic State appropriated selected religious

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Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Chi Zhang, Room 401 Unit 1 Building 4, Wen Pai Garden, Bingzhou South Road 116, Taiyuan, China. E-mail: zhangchilindsay@gmail.com

doctrines to support its state-building. Some politicians and scholars go to another extreme by trying to wipe away any links between *true* Islam and terrorism. For example, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said: “There is no Islamic terror” (Bekdil 2016). Fetullah Gülen, a Turkish Islamic scholar, said, “No terrorist can be a Muslim, and no true Muslim can be a terrorist” (Gülen 2001). A campaign called “True Islam” professes to “wage a Jihad of truth” in response to the extremist interpretations of Islam (Ahmadiyya Muslim Community n.d.). The organizer of this campaign, as “the only Islamic organization to endorse the separation of mosque and state” (Ahmadiyya Muslim Community 2018), advocated the separation of mosque and state as a “truth” about Islam (Ahmadiyya Muslim Community n.d.).

A common tactic used by these different actors is that they rely their arguments on their private interpretations of Islam as if such interpretations are an unquestioned truth accepted by all in order to deny accusations. This process, known as “no true Scotsman” fallacy, is, in essence, an ad-hoc rescue—an attempt to protect a generalization from counter-examples and refutation of the generalization. The following is a modified rendition of the fallacy in the context of the war on terror discourse:

Person A: “A good Muslim endorses the separation of mosque and state.”

Person B: “But my friend Mohamed is a Muslim, and he does not endorse the separation of mosque and state.”

Person A: “Then he is not a *true* Muslim.” (Dowden n.d.)

Messages like this are frequently seen in the public discourse on terrorism, every time Muslims are called to denounce terrorism and to draw a clear line of demarcation between themselves and terrorists. Based on an essentialist understanding of religion, these messages assume that Islam possesses some “essential” characteristics and Islamic traditions can be categorized into “good” ones and “bad” ones. This paper seeks to highlight the “no true Scotsman” fallacy in China’s de-radicalization program that provoked new rounds of criticism and debate over its treatment of Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). It argues that an attempt to counteract the essentialist assumption about Uyghurs leads to a reinforced “good-versus-bad” dichotomous categorization of Muslims, reflected in the binary of “normal” and “illegal” in China’s religious policy.

Echoing the official line, some influential figures within the Muslim community also contributed to this process as they sought to distance themselves from “terrorists,” thus reinforcing the idea that a *true*

Muslim would not practice these “illegal activities” as acts of piety. Extending the framework drawing on scholars such as Mamdani (2002), Maira (2009), Semati (2011), and Downing (2019), this paper seeks to contribute to this scholarship in two dimensions. Theoretically, it explores the “no true Scotsman” fallacy and the “good” and “bad” Muslims dilemma based on Downing (2019) and Guhin and Wyrzten (2016, 129), through the case of de-radicalization in Xinjiang, demonstrating that efforts to fight back essentialist assumptions might feed into further essentialization. Empirically, it challenges the simplistic rendering of “good” and “bad” religious practices beyond the West by offering an empirical overview of the political nature of religious policy in China.

This paper will start by situating the discussion within the broader debate about essentialized Islam and the categorization of “good” and “bad” Muslims. The second section will contextualize China’s approach to a growing threat posed by a perceived revival of Islam in China. This section will be followed by a discussion of the label “illegal religious activities” and its implications in the context of counter-terrorism, before offering concluding remarks on its broader implications.

THE “GOOD” AND “BAD” MUSLIM DICHOTOMY

Considering that the Muslim community is most likely to be affected by counter-terrorism measures, it is surprising to find that the “good” and “bad” Muslim dichotomy has rarely been the main focus of journal articles in the field of terrorism research. However, it has been routinely mentioned as something to be condemned without further interrogation. To be sure, there has been a welcomed increase in the number of articles concerning the unjust treatment of Muslims under anti-terrorism laws from a critical perspective—both within and beyond the scope set by the Critical Terrorism Studies. However, very little research focused on the rationale behind the creation and reinforcing of “good” and “bad” Muslim dichotomy beyond the Western context.

Mamdani’s landmark study on how the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing War on Terror that gave rise to a need to distinguish “good Muslims” from “bad Muslims” provide major inspiration for this paper. Ignoring political histories in the Middle East, “cultural talks” represent an essentialist approach to define cultures and attribute specific political issues to the “essence” of a particular culture (Mamdani 2002, 767). Semati (2011, 114) also criticized the tendency of scholars to “essentialize”

Islam: they treat Islam as “an overriding explanatory framework” and attribute issues to Islam when they can be explained otherwise. Essentialism contributes to the othering of Islam as an ontologically different category (Semati 2011, 114).

Ignoring the difference between criminals and civic citizens, “cultural talks” emphasize the difference between “good” and “bad” Muslims. “Moderate” and “genuine” Islam is considered something that is benign and should be tolerated, while “extremist political Islam” something that can and should be separated from the former and be rejected by society (Mamdani 2002, 768). This unilateral recognition by the state projects a strict implementation of secularism and the absolute power of the state over religion. Mamdani argues against reading people’s behavior from their religion and seeking explanations from doctrines while ignoring “larger historical encounters,” of which terrorism has been one outcome (Mamdani 2002, 768).

Maira extends Mamdani’s framework through a feminist lens. She sees the “good” and “bad” Muslim dichotomy as a continuity of the notions of “enemies” and “defenders of freedom” from the cold war era (Maira 2009, 633). As part of the “humanitarian justifications for imperial intervention,” “good” Muslims are imagined, created, and constructed to support the humanitarian premise of the War on Terror (Maira 2009, 634). “Good” Muslims became “darlings of the Right-wing and mainstream media,” staying in the industry by helping the state to redefine the role of Muslim in the public sphere (Maira 2009, 635). They helped to create the impression that “true” Muslims should welcome the freedom offered by the West, and have the same kind of resentments toward terrorists as their white American counterparts do. Co-opting influential figures from within the Muslim members, the state politicized theological questions such as what it means to be a Muslim by prescribing how “true” Muslims should behave.

Applying this debate to the French context, Downing (2019, 14) explores how narratives of Muslim’s deviance and “abnormality” brighten social boundaries, while the banal, “everyday” nature of Muslims nuance their identity and thus blur social boundaries. These banal aspects of Muslim identity make it difficult to construct a particular group as a homogenous security threat. Still, they might also reinforce the “good” and “bad” Muslims dichotomy within the community (Downing 2019, 15). Guhin and Wyrzten (2016, 129) point to the same dilemma: one’s efforts in fighting back essentialism may risk feeding into further essentialization within the essentialized community. For example, to

counteract the essentialist assumption that all Muslims are bad, people unwittingly create more nuanced categories within the Muslim community and feed into the categorization of “good” and “bad” Muslims.

In practice, the redefining of the role of Muslim citizens results in concrete examples of problematic implementation of counter-terrorism policies. Critics of the Prevent strategy argue that the government, instead of the communities, become the defining actor who decides which kind of practice is acceptable and which is not, based on insufficient knowledge about Islam (Mohammed and Siddiqui 2011, 5). The police, teachers, nurses, among others, are required to play a role which involves expertise they do not have—that of Islamic theology (Mohammed and Siddiqui 2011, 6).

In the post-9/11 era, issues such as the headscarf controversy have been brought into the debate about national security, contributing to the construction of Islam as a “threatening deviation” to Western countries (Mavelli 2013, 159). Statements like “no true Muslim would do such a thing” add “hidden terms” to the contract between the state and the Muslim community. For example, some group members refute the necessity of wearing burka or *niqab* as a central part of Islamic doctrine (Ahmed 2017). But when such a statement is brought into the political debate about how Muslims should act in order to be recognized as good citizens into the mainstream society, not wearing burka or *niqab* become a hidden term that specifies the duty that Muslims are expected to perform in a secular society. In doing so, the speakers redefine and reinforce the boundary between religious and political realms (Alexander 2013, 532). The claims that the use of face veil is at odds with the French value involve the redefinition of both Islam and the French value. Linking face veil with national security, the incompatibility between Islam and host societies is heightened, evidenced by Western Europeans’ support for restrictions on Muslim women’s religious clothing (Salazar and Gardner 2018).

The boundary between the public and private spheres became blurred when Dalil Boubakeur, a mufti and the rector of the Great Mosque of Paris, spoke against the *niqab*, arguing that it was not prescribed in Islam and linking it to radicalization (Barnes 2018). In dissuading Muslim women from wearing the *niqab*, he redefined Islam based on his research and interpretation of it. When his statement is politicized to support the ban on the *niqab*, the dichotomy between “my” and “their” interpretations of Islam is further cemented. By recognizing the authority of one set of interpretation, the state declares the alternative interpretation to be deviant and threatening, thus sanctioning the use of extraordinary

measures against it. This kind of refutation constitutes a “no true Scotsman” fallacy when the perceived quality of the group is being redefined during the debate. For example, the statement “True Muslim would not speak against the West while enjoying the freedom it offers” adds “not speaking against the West” to the terms that a Muslim must accept to integrate into the host society, thus redefining the obligation of a Muslim.

The discussion in the public discourse about what is *true* Islam and how *true* Muslims should behave is not only seen in Western societies where their Muslim communities are often unduly blamed for not doing enough to condemn terrorism. The discussion is equally, if not more contentious in China where the ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang had existed for centuries intermittently before the situation degenerated into a wholesale People’s War on Terror after the Urumqi Riots in 2009 and several attacks in inland cities in 2013 and 2014. The discussion above is constructive to unravel how efforts to rectify essentialist assumptions toward Uyghurs fed into further essentialization and reinforced the “good and bad” Muslims dichotomy within Uyghurs. The following section will provide an overview of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) perception of religion as a context for the analysis of the “good and bad” Muslims.

THE CHINESE CONTEXT: THE CCP’S PERCEPTION OF RELIGION

To understand the state’s attitude toward “illegal religious activities,” it is essential to lay out the context in which religion, especially Islam, is perceived in Chinese policy circles and academia. The close ties between the policy circles and academia in China mean that data from these two types of sources are to some extent mutually reinforcing, despite some attempts within the academia to clarify the nature of “illegal religious activities”. For this paper, “believers” and “Muslims”, if not otherwise stated, mainly refer to Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang who are considered ethnically Turkic, which should not be confused with ethnically Han Chinese Muslims known as *Hui* Muslims, or atheist Han Chinese in Xinjiang. Uyghurs constitute around 40% of the Xinjiang population, mostly inhabiting southern Xinjiang (National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China 2010).

Two sets of philosophical beliefs in Chinese society—Confucianism and Marxism—are both at odds with Islam. Confucianism envisions a unified state in which all peoples will eventually merge; and it assumes

a subordinating role of ethnic minorities and expects their obedience to the state (He 2005, 58). Marxism leads to the belief among political elites that issues of ethnicity will wither away at the end of class struggle (He 2005, 60). Like liberalism, Marxism, a secular doctrine adopted as a state ideology, poses questions regarding co-opting the large number of believers while remaining distant from, if not hostile to, religion. Mainly, Marxism–Leninism associates religion with foreign cultural imperialism and feudalism, and therefore early religious policies in socialist countries were geared toward eliminating religion to pave the way for a “universal acceptance of socialist orthodoxies” (Leung 2005, 894).

Modeling its minority policy on the Soviet experience, China initially endorsed the idea of national self-determination (He 2005, 61). However, Mao Zedong abandoned the policy of self-determination in 1949 as his concerns for China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity grew in the light of independence movements in Tibet supported by the United States. The Regional Ethnic Autonomy System was established to allow a higher degree of autonomy in regions where more than 20% of the population is non-Han (Lai 2009). However, political elites’ obsession with firm centralized control complicated the administration of autonomous regimes. For example, the Chairman of the Autonomous Region, although often an ethnic minority, is chosen by Beijing; and the Party Secretaries and military commanders are usually Han Chinese. Political pluralism is beyond Beijing’s agenda, given its concerns for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity (Israeli 2002, 48). As a result, “China’s Museum-style multiculturalism,” according to Leibold (2013), is strictly limited to areas like cultural production, distribution, and symbol formation. Beijing’s recognition of diversity is conditional—cultural diversity is allowed when it does not challenge national unity.

A key concern China shares with the West is the intrinsic incompatibility of Islam with a modern secular state, most notably demonstrated by the tenet to impose Sharia law. Gladney (2003, 451) is relatively optimistic about the possibility of a reconciliation between the Chinese state and the Muslim community. Others see no prospect of an overall accommodation for a number of reasons (Israeli 2002).

First, Islam, like other religions, does not assume a clear-cut separation of religious and political life. It is also a philosophical belief that prescribes how to live beyond the practice of religion. While the government unilaterally assumes a separation of church and state, believers consider what the government calls “religion” not only prescribing their acts of believing, but also bonding, belonging, and behaving (Saroglou 2011).

Islam stands out mainly because it considers the Sharia as the sole source of law and the norm for individual behavior (Roy 1994, 13). Roy (1994, 10) argues that the Sharia law creates a parallel space to the political space, where the practice of religion will inevitably clash with secular legal systems. However, the boundary between the political and religious space is fabricated for the convenience of the administration of a secular state. It is confusing, therefore, for believers to submit to Allah only partially in private, and follow a set of secular legal code in public. The overlap between the functions of the state and religion adds to the confusion regarding who possesses the authority in mundane issues, such as who authorizes a marriage or a divorce and who provides education. An example is that among Sunnites, from Muhammad, an imam or a caliph assumes the administrative and political functions, as opposed to religious ones (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* n.d.). Most of Chinese Uyghurs are Sunnites, and the issues of religious interference in marriage, divorce, and education are significant in China's de-radicalization policy (see People's Congress 2017). Li's (2004, 22) study indicates that since the 1980s, in Kashgar, Khotan, and Aksu, there have been 9,000 cases where Muslims were reported to have "interfered in the executive, the judiciary, education, and marital administration." As an example of the "interference in education," according to Li, believers, by which he is likely to refer to Muslim Uyghurs, organized "underground religious classes," which are considered illegal because their teaching may contradict the kind of education provided in public schools that aims to forge political conformity. The *Ordinances on de-radicalization* explicitly categorizes "interference" as a criminal offence (People's Congress 2017). In doing so, the state denies the legitimacy of grey areas between "good" and "bad" Muslims.

Second, the concept of *ummah* accentuates the transnational nature of Islam. Indeed, state borders are little more than imagined demarcations that are meaningful to the states but not so much to fellow believers of the same religion. Islam does not consider the states in terms of a territorialized nation-state (Roy 1994, 13). Instead, its believers are organized into a worldwide community, in which the religious and political spheres overlap. In the light of self-radicalization and grievance-driven conversions in the West, the spread of Islam and the increasing religiosity of Muslims become particularly worrying. The reluctance of Muslims to merge the parallel spaces of religion and politics leads to self-segregation and alienation.

Similar concerns are observed in China. The CCP’s vigilance regarding religion has its roots in the perception that religious freedom has long been used as a pretext for intervention. Religious extremism is often framed as a “political question,” instead of a religious one in Chinese official discourse (see Wang 2010). By denying an incident as a religious question, the state deprived the individuals involved of the possibility to be treated as mere believers. Falun Gong, a Buddhist anti-CCP organization that had involved in a self-immolation event at the Tiananmen Square, fiercely criticized Chinese political leaders for orchestrating the incident. Its members found no lack of sympathies in the West, such as Amnesty International (2016), Freedom House (2015), and the *Diplomat* (Browde 2016). Falun Gong’s Newspaper *Epoch Times* is disseminated in many China Towns and Chinese markets in the West. In China, believing in Falun Gong, which has been designated as a cult, is not a matter of personal belief, but a powerful statement of one’s political inclination. Shewket Imin, a member of the Standing Committee of Xinjiang, underlines the concern that Western support for religious groups in China has always been associated with the liberalist agenda to impose a democratic transition in China (Cui and Wang 2016). According to former President Jiang (1993), interventions in the name of religious freedom are part of the “Westernize and Split” strategy that threatens the unity and stability in China’s minority regions.

The concerns for the increasing religiosity of the Chinese Muslim community are a crucial context for the escalated tensions between the Han-majority Chinese society and Islam and resulted in tighter control over religion, which is evidenced by several events. Under the current President Xi Jinping, a shift in the government’s attitude toward religious affairs can be seen through the following events. On 22 and 23 April 2016, Xi Jinping and other members of the political bureau attended the National Religious Working Conference (Xinhua 2016). Previously, conferences of this nature had been chaired by the Bureau of Religious Affairs. The fact that the highest political leader attended this conference indicates the CCP’s attempt to put more emphasis on religious affairs as a political issue. In 2018, the former State Administration for Religious Affairs was dissolved, and religious matters were brought under the control of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Community Party of China (Xinhua 2018). The restructuring explicitly serves to facilitate the “Sinicization of religion”—an adaptation of religion to fit with Chinese society—which has been a critical dimension of China’s integration policy (Gansu Provincial Party Committee United

Front Work Department Research Group 2016; Xinhua 2018). Since the National Religious Working Conference in 2016, the state has managed to co-opt the Muslims community to support the “Sinicization of Islam.” Yang Faming, Chairman of the Islamic Association of China, stated that “Islam can take root in China only if it adjusts itself to fit with Chinese society and integrates into Chinese culture” (State Bureau of Religious Affairs 2017).

While the call for the “Sinicization of religion” is not novel in Chinese politics, it gained renewed attention after every terrorist incident, when the non-Han Muslims are called to denounce terrorism and distance themselves, the Sinicized “good” Muslims, from “bad” Muslims who refuse to be Sinicized.

Putting the “Sinicization of religion” in perspective, similar—at least superficially—attempts can be found in Western Europe, for example, the call to re-embrace the “British values” in the UK and the assimilationist integration policy toward Muslims in France. In Turkey, state and non-state actors advocate their own versions of Islam—Turkification and Kurdification of Islam, in attempts to gain the authority in the interpretation of “true Islam” (Gurses 2015, 137). In all these cases, the parallels between the attempts to adapt religion in categorically different regime types highlight the same kind of discontent of the defining actors about Muslim’s unwillingness to be assimilated, in other words, to become the “good” Muslims in the eyes of the defining actors. As Gurses (2015, 137) argues, this conscious transformation of Islam to suppress alternative interpretations, paradoxically, gave momentum to its opposing side. If the Sinicization of Islam goes too far, China might be expecting a rise in dissent among Muslim groups, amalgamated by their shared disaffection toward the official interpretation of Islam.

Chinese academia tends to explain increased religiosity in the context of “pan-Islamism” in China. The likelihood of conflict increases with the increasingly homogeneous appearance of Uyghur ethnicity in terms of their understanding of Islam, the region of residence (South Xinjiang), complicated by their converging socioeconomic status (middle and lower class) in the rapid modernization process in Xinjiang (Gubler and Selway 2012).

Based on internal archives from the Headquarter of Xinjiang Military Region, Yan (2006, 61–62) argues that between 1996 and 2000, Xinjiang saw 270 cases of terrorist attacks and armed conflicts orchestrated by “international hostile religious organizations.” Besides, the sheer number of mosques is considered an indicator of the fact that the

supply of religious services has exceeded far beyond the “normal” religious demand. For example, according to Ma Pinyan, the number of religious buildings in Xinjiang is out of proportion, and its mosque/Muslim ratio exceeds many Muslim-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Iran (Ma 2003, 74). Abulikemu Aishan, a researcher at the Xinjiang University, argues that Xinjiang has over 26,000 mosques, five times of the number of mosques in five Central Asian countries combined, indicating that the government has implemented a lenient religious policy toward Xinjiang Muslims (Ta Kung Pao 2015). Using the latest census data of 2010, Xinjiang (0.12%) has a higher rate of mosques than Turkey (0.09%).¹ As Gurses and Ozturk (2020) show, the number of mosques is associated with the ideological confrontation between the state and the Kurds.

Other than the number of mosques, the extravagant Arabian architecture style of mosques was also attacked as evidence for the reluctance of believers to be assimilated (State Bureau of Religious Affairs 2017). These arguments indeed depict a worrying scene of the rapid growth of Islam in China. However, the number of mosques needs to be put in the context of rehabilitation of believers after the Cultural Revolution, when the government allocated huge funds and resources to rebuild mosques destroyed in the 1960s. Furthermore, the obsession with the extravagant Arabian architecture style is not necessarily a result of growing religiosity, but of the tendency of the local governments to showcase their “political achievements” (*zhengji*) through landmark religious buildings. Before the concerns for pan-Islamization were brought to the forefront, building mosques might have even been considered an achievement of the local government to attract tourists.

Another source of concern regarding increasing Islamic religiosity is the number of converts within the political system. Chen (2009, 104) observed that in Southern Xinjiang villages where non-believers are a minority, atheist Party members and officials were either isolated or forced to convert to Islam through slandering and threatening. A survey conducted in the county of Shule in Southwest Xinjiang shows that of 293 Party members, 160 (54.6%) converted to Islam, and 83.3% of the senior members were converted (Yan 2006, 148). The prohibition of Communist Party members from fasting during Ramadan has been considered an encroachment into religious freedom in the West (RFA 2015; VOA 2015). In China, it is a “political discipline” that Communist Party members shall not adopt any religious belief, as doing so contravenes the Marxist dialectical materialist worldview (Wang and Ma

2016). The logic that underpins this rule is that although the Chinese Constitution advocates religious freedom for all, when individuals pledge to join the Party, they are no longer *ordinary* citizens. In doing so, they pledge their ideological loyalty to the Party and declare to adopt a “Marxist outlook on religion,” and enter into a contract to fulfil their obligation as a Marxist to promote atheism (Jiang 1993). Against the context of general anxiety among the officials regarding the growing influence of religion upon a secular government, Xi Jinping explicitly stated that “Communist Party members must be firm Marxist atheists” at the National Religious Work Conference in 2016 (Xinhua 2016). The CCP is aware that in minority regions, it is unrealistic to implement this discipline as it is contradictory to the government’s efforts in increasing the number of ethnic minorities within its political system. However, as religion is considered at odds with socialism with Chinese characteristics, the CCP does not wish to risk the absolute loyalty of its members (Tian 2016). This rule indicates that not only Muslims are labeled as “good” and “bad” based on their level of religiosity, cadres of the Communist Party are also evaluated based on whether they live up to their pledge and embrace the “Marxist outlook on religion” wholeheartedly.

These perceptions play an important role in shaping China’s religious policy and justifying the Sinicization of religion in china. In particular, they shaped the ways in which the government categories “normal” and “illegal” religious activities. These perceptions resulted in concrete policies that require the government’s permission in many daily practices.

BETWEEN “ILLEGAL” AND “NORMAL” RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

The first question that needs clarifying who the defining power is. In the context of counter-terrorism in China, it is not unusual to see Uyghurs themselves making claims about how “true” community members should behave, in an attempt to fight back the essentialist assumption that all Uyghurs are terrorists. However, considering the strong influence of the state upon public discourse in China, the “voice” of Uyghurs is highly likely to be crafted or selectively used by the state. It is difficult, in practice, to clearly distinguish government discourse from “Uyghurs” voice”. For example, from 2011 to 2016, the Xinjiang government launched an initiative called “Project Beauty” to encourage Uyghur women to go out and enter the industry of cosmetics, clothes, and

accessories with apparent “Uyghur” features (Sun 2012). On the positive side, the project, framed as an economic development project, did improve gender equality by increasing economic independence among Uyghur women who were previously unemployed and heavily influenced, sometimes unwillingly, by their husbands’ faith and practices. Reinforcing the idea that “beautiful” Uyghur women are those who act “normally,” that is, who adopt the kind of modern worldview shared by “normal” Chinese citizens, this project is an attempt to counteract the essentialist assumption that Uyghur women are black robe-wearing, repressed, backward, and hardened fundamentalists. However, this attempt inevitably feeds into further dichotomization of “good” and “bad” Uyghur women. One example is Etles silk, a kind of traditional fabric considered to be quintessentially Uyghur, known for its use of vibrant colors. Project Beauty resulted in a boom in the Etles industry, but it also reinforced the essentialist assumption that “good” Uyghur women are extrovert, open-minded, and versatile. A woman researcher at the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences argued against jilbab (the Uyghur equivalent of *burqa*) and face veil by portraying a scene in which Uyghurs, since ancient times, have always been a happy people fond of singing and dancing, contending that this long custom of gracefully displaying one’s beauty has been abruptly violated by extremism (Abulikemu 2013). In another report, a Uyghur woman, accompanied by her husband, handed in her *jilbab* and veil voluntarily to the local villagers’ committee. She expressed her regret in adopting an extremist lifestyle out of ignorance and recollected that when she was a little girl, her granny, mother, and sisters all wore bright and vibrant colors. She concluded that it is in the very “nature” of Uyghur women to display their beauty and their happiness by singing and dancing; and they should not act against their “nature” under the influence of extremism (Gou, He, and Fan 2014).

The blatant sexual objectification being another topic which deserves its own research, this paper focuses on how community members themselves contributed to the public discourse surrounding who the Uyghurs “truly” are and how “true” Uyghurs should live. The question being examined here is not whether Muslim women should wear *jilbab* or not. Instead, this paper questions the striking similarity between the official discourse and the public discourse regarding the paradoxical attempt to counteract essentialism. Counter-terrorism and de-radicalization policies necessitate a clearly-defined boundary between religious and political realms that are difficult to discern in practice. The overlaps between religion and politics, and between private and public spheres impede the states’ ability to

differentiate “illegal” and “normal” religious practices. When the state is pressured to do so, its power of redefining a religion becomes its own Achilles’ heel that could potentially undermine the legitimacy of the entire counter-terrorism strategy. Despite the diversity of counter-terrorism approaches under different regimes, the abuse of the power of redefining is an underlying cause of grievances. While some liberal democracies redefine “true” Islam as embracing modernity and Westernization, countries such as Iran redefine “modesty” by adding a specific Islamic dress code to it. In either case, by redefining religion and believers’ responsibility, the state imposes its interpretation of religion onto believers within its territories, using either a law or a norm to shape citizens’ religious practices.

The censorship of voice of dissent helped to weave Uyghurs’ accounts into the state’s efforts to justify the elimination of the “grey area” between “normal” and “illegal” religious activities. By illegalizing undesired activities, the state conflates issues of two dimensions. Interpretations of a religion can be put in a spectrum, where some hold tightly to a rigorous system of shared beliefs and morality, and others are more flexible in embedding religious doctrines to a liberal way of life (Iannaccone and Berman 2006, 115). The former is often labeled “extremists,” “sects,” “cults,” and “fundamentalists,” while the latter was given more friendly labels such as “moderates,” “liberals,” and “mainstream churches” (Iannaccone and Berman 2006, 115). The line between the two is a fine one and diversity exists within each kind of interpretation, and the former does not always lead to actual crimes. The existence of a “grey area” between “normal” and “illegal” leaves some room for theological debates. While interpretations of religion are a topic better discussed by theologians with reference to religious scripts, the designation of a crime is a legal matter which requires actual evidence and a fair trial. The case of China shows that the conflation of these two dimensions resulted in unclear messages about the legality of religious practices and shrunken space for believers.

In China, “illegal religious activities” are criminal offences defined as any religious activities and activities in the name of religion that contravene national laws, regulations, policies at the state level, and the religious laws, regulations, rules at the level of autonomous regions, according to *Opinions on Defining Illegal Religion* jointly issued by the United Front Department of the Party Committee of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, State Administration for Religious Affairs, and the Ministry of Public Security in 2011 (Feng 2014). Data from China Judgements Online indicate that among all the cases involving illegal religious

activities from November 2013 to January 2017, 29.63% are criminal cases as opposed to civil cases, 19% took place in Xinjiang, and 48% were tried in 2015, coinciding with the 1-year Strike Hard campaign. Government officials see a direct link between “illegal religious activities” and terrorism. Former Chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Nur Bekri, stated that “Illegal religious activities will definitely lead to religious fanaticism, religious fanaticism will definitely lead to extremist ideologies, and extremist ideologies will definitely lead to violent terrorism” (China News 2012). This linear understanding of the causality of terrorism reflects the simplistic rationale behind China’s religious policy as part of its counter-terrorism strategy.

It is worth noting that there are some attempts to clear up the confusion caused by the artificial boundary between “genuine” and “illegal” religious practice in China’s political discourse. To denounce the essentialist assumption that the public, mostly atheist Han, share about Islam, Chinese officials repeatedly highlight that “religious extremism is not religion.” They refer to Islam as a peaceful religion, and extremist ideologies as “distortion and blasphemy” (Ye 2014, 2016). The CCP also attempted to differentiate “real” believers from those who believe in superstitions (Tian 2016). The fight against superstition—the “bad” aspects of religion—has been going on since the Mao era. As part of the feudalism reminiscent of the Old China, superstition was linked with imperialism and counter-revolution, an easy target of the Socialist Education Movement that sought to consolidate power by gearing people’s faith from religion to the Communist Party (Ho 2018). As a result, a dichotomy between superstition and science was created. However, the reappearance of religion in the post-Mao era demonstrated that an outright demonization of religion did not work. This lesson undoubtedly helped nuance the CCP’s understanding of religion: instead of making unnecessary enemies by attacking religion itself, it needs to focus on the “bad” elements of religion, and grant leniency to “genuine” and “normal” religious activities that do not seem to pose a threat to the regime.

A brief discussion of the anti-superstition movement in the Mao era above highlights the continuity of the current religious policy in China. What seems to have improved is that now the regime acknowledges the need to nuance people’s understanding of religion in order not to drive away support from the vast number of believers of all faiths in China. Indeed, an essential task for United Front departments at all levels is to ensure the loyalty of believers whose worldviews might be at odds with the Marxist–Leninist–Maoist ideology. However, what remains the same

is that the regime, dedicated to fulfilling its self-assigned obligation to guide people to develop the correct outlook on religion, does not conceal the state monopoly of the defining power. Even though the more nuanced categorization is created within the Muslim community, Muslims cannot escape from being essentialized, from being labeled as either “good” or “bad.”

Jiansheng Li (2004, 21), a professor at the Xinjiang Normal University, attempted a twofold definition of “illegal religious activities”:

Type 1: activities that interfere with the secular legal system, such as building mosques without permission and avoiding registering marriage and divorce in the local administration system.

Type 2: criminal offences under the guise of religion, such as propagating separatism and extremism.

According to Li, Type 1 activities can be categorized as “contradiction among the people,” which are committed unknowingly due to ignorance of laws and regulations, rather than a deliberate resistance to authority. Type 2 activities, which are, in essence, political, reflect “contradiction between ourselves and the enemy” (Li 2004). The categorization of two types of contradictions is a legacy of the Mao era, which has been woven into Chinese political discourse to differentiate friends and enemies. Highlighting the political nature of the Type 2 activities, Li labeled the perpetrators as the “enemies,” which justified the treatment of them in as criminals that attempt to sabotage the state. However, Li himself recognizes that Type 1 and Type 2 can be intertwined in practice (Li 2004, 22). For example, organizing an “underground religious class” might have been driven by the intention of a small number of “enemies” to propagate separatism; while those who attended it might have been ignorant of the law that prohibits the religious “interference” in the secular education system. This categorization is also problematic because even for those organizers, it is difficult to discern whether they act out of pure ignorance or have “ulterior motives.”

Concerned about the negative impact of broadening the target, Ma (2003, 73) cautions against the confusion of the political and religious nature of events. He argues that “disregarding the nature of events”—euphemistically referring to over-politicizing religious activities—might erode the legitimacy of China’s counter-terrorism strategy and intensify anti-government sentiments which can be utilized by separatists to recruit new members. While it is clear from the above discussion that critical reflection among Chinese scholars is not entirely absent, the following

discussion over actual policies indicates that scholars’ concerns have barely been emphasized in practice.

No state law has specific criteria on designating “illegal religious activities,” but the attempts to clarify the distinction between “illegal” and “normal” religious activities can be found in documents issued by local governments. The following list is arranged from formal documents to less formal ones including extracts from formal documents, and from higher to lower levels of the government. In 2013, the Xinjiang government issued *Several Opinions on Governing Illegal Religious Activities and Curbing the Infiltration of Religious Extremism (Provisional)*, which indicated that local governments have attempted to address this confusion by issuing their own documents (The Party Committee General Office of the XUAR and The People’s Government of the XUAR 2014). A document entitled *Opinions on Defining Illegal Religious Activities*, also known as the *26 Forms of Illegal Religious Activities*, issued by the General Office of the XUAR Party Committee, has been circulated since 2011. A record of “Religious Policy and Regulations Study Month” shows that 1,200 copies of the *26 Forms of Illegal Religious Activities* have been disseminated in the army, schools, and religious venues within the first quarter of 2012 (Bureau of Religious Affairs of Xinjiang Production and Construction Corporation 2012). Similar documents include the *21 Bans* published by Turpan Prefectural Administrative Office, the list of 75 “manifestations of extremist religious activities,” possibly published by the local United Front Department, and the 15 “manifestations of radicalization” from the *Ordinances on De-radicalization in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region* (Turpan Government 2013; Bianjiang Fankong 2017; People’s Congress 2017). Since December 2014, a booklet entitled *Basic Knowledge on Distinguishing Religious Extremist Activities (75 Specific Activities)* has been circulated in many regions in Xinjiang through “study events” (*xuexi huodong*). It starts with a statement that “Religious extremism is not equivalent to religion, but a target we are to curb and strike” (Guanchazhe 2014). The document encourages its readers to report to the police if they see any of the 75 designated activities.

The attempts to clarify the criteria to designate “illegal religious activities” highlighted the negative impacts of the “no true Scotsman” fallacy in counter-terrorism. The presumption that Islam possesses some essential characteristics and that “bad” religious practices can be neatly separated from the “good” ones has put shackles on religious practices. The power of designating “illegal” practices per se can be a potential source

of injustice, as the attempt to discern the nature of activities that are in essence both political and religious often results in an over-politicization of daily practices. The following section will discuss a few points that demonstrate the nature and implications of this fallacy in the light of “illegal religious activities.”

First, the state recognizes only authorized activities as “normal” and label all unauthorized ones as “illegal.” The requirement for the government’s permission for daily religious practices results in high administrative cost and insufficient supply of service for believers. Permission is required for activities such as building and extending mosques, organizing pilgrimages, inviting external clergies to conduct religious activities, opening religious schools or praying rooms, organizing religious activities outside mosques, accepting donations from international organizations or individuals, and attending training or conferences organized by international organizations or individuals (Guanchazhe 2014; The Party Committee General Office of the XUAR and The People’s Government of the XUAR 2014; People’s Congress 2017). The long list of activities that require approval severely hindered believers’ daily religious practices. Criminalizing unauthorized schools does not always correspond to the realities in some remote villages, where authorized religious schools are scarce and cannot meet the demand of some Uyghur parents (Wang 2014). The high cost of conducting “normal” religious activities generated a large market for “illegal” religious activities to meet the demand of believers. Criminalizing all the unauthorized practices is an abuse of the state’s power to define which part of religion is “legal,” and it creates a considerable burden for law enforcement.

Second, the state criminalizes passive resistance and advocates various cultural activities to counteract extremist ideologies. Resistance against these activities is considered a sign of radicalization. Cases of passive resistance include resisting traditional ethnic clothing, music, dancing, poems, meshrep,² and sporting events; resisting subsistence allowances provided by the government, and other official documents such as identity card and marriage certificate; resisting bilingual education and public schools; refusing to do business during Ramadan; refusing to drink, smoke, dance, sing at weddings, and not crying at funerals. The state encourages the Uyghurs to consume cultural products that they might find inappropriate and indoctrinating. For example, in 2015, local governments in Xinjiang began to hold dancing contests named after a popular song called “Little Apple” (Guanchazhe 2014; The Party Committee General Office of the XUAR and The People’s Government of the

XUAR 2014; People’s Congress 2017). Participants encouraged to revise the lyrics to include de-radicalization policy. This kind of events is overtly political. According to a Hong Kong-based editor at Foreign Policy, some Muslims found this blatant propaganda “distasteful” (Lu 2015). The government provided inadequate culturally appropriate, less indoctrinating alternatives for Muslims at the same time it illegalizing many religious practices in the market. Targeting passive resistance as part of “illegal religious activities” might result in further alienating Uyghurs in an attempt to gain their support.

Third, the definition of “illegal religious activities” is broadened to include necessary, but not sufficient conditions for radicalization. Cases of radicalization may indeed involve signs such as an abrupt stop in cigarette use, migration of the entire family, stocking a large amount of food at home, the sudden disappearance of the child from a very religious family, praying outside mosques together with other believers, possessing printing equipment more than one would need, and purchasing physical training and camping equipment “without a proper reason” (Guanchazhe 2014). However, none of these signs is sufficient to accuse someone of radicalization. Indeed, printing equipment can be used for spreading extremist ideologies, but it is wrong to assume that all those who own a binding machine mean to use it for this purpose. Furthermore, the *75 Manifestations of Religious Extremist Activities* includes teaching Turkic, Urdu, Arabic languages “in the name of cultural exchange, yet for the purpose of spreading extremist ideologies” as a sign of radicalization. But given the CCP’s broad definition of extremist ideologies, how can an ordinary citizen discern the covert purpose of an otherwise perfectly normal practice while the officials and scholars themselves are struggling to do so?

Fourth, the documents illegalized acts such as forcing juveniles to pray and study religious scripts and participate in Ramadan at school; forcing women to wear *jilbab*; parents forcing their children to take part in illegal religion study events or to drop out and resist compulsory education provided by the state. The framing of these terms indicates the government’s attempt to emancipate Uyghurs. It shows its efforts to protect free will by outlawing those who coerce others to participate in religious activities. However, in practice, the local governments leave little room for Uyghurs to interpret Islam in their own way.

The above analysis of the regulations on “illegal” religious activities reveals the underlying “no true Scotsman” fallacy and its implications. Adding “normal” to the definition of “true Muslim” helped the state to

justify extraordinary measures against all those that are “not normal.” As the analysis shows, there is no grey area between “normal” and “illegal,” and the state targeted a large number of religious practices as “illegal.” As a result, Uyghurs’ religious demand cannot be met, and the promotion of “normal” cultural products might further alienate the Uyghur population. As Ma (2003, 73) points out, the over-politicization of religious activities might aggravate the very problem that China’s de-radicalization policy is designed to tackle. The binary opposition between “normal” and “illegal” highlights the same “good” and “bad” Muslims dichotomy underlying the terrorism discourse in the West (Mamdani 2002; Maira 2009; Semati 2011; Downing 2019). Historically, fears of assimilation and discrimination played an important role in ethnic tensions in former communist countries such as Azerbaijan and Russia (Fox 2000, 10). The experience of other countries has shown that heavy-handed approaches to managing religious affairs often result in entrenching existing divisions.

CONCLUSION

The efforts of the state to monopolize the power to define “terrorism” and “religion” are not new, and not only seen in China, but this paper demonstrated how the state’s attempt to fight back essentialist assumptions about Muslims might result in further essentialization. The case of China offers an interesting perspective because as a regime that takes seriously the need to guide people to adopt the “correct” ideology, the CCP does not hide its emphasis on the “propaganda work,” although the term *xuanchuan* has now more often been translated as “publicization” in official discourse considering the negative connotation of “propaganda” in the West. This feature of the CCP is useful to bring to light the “no true Scotsman” fallacy in the context of counter-terrorism in China. Government documents at the local level reveal the dilemma whereby the attempts to guide the people and the government officials to develop the “correct” understanding of Islam have resulted in further essentialization of Muslims. For example, the understanding that “normal” believers would not need to pursue religious education outside China’s secular education system immediately put those who do so in the category of “illegal,” which risks further marginalizing and alienating Uyghur Muslims who, instead of having a separatist agenda, are simply unsatisfied with the kind of secular education provided at public schools. While efforts like the “Little Apple” dancing contest were made to nuance Uyghurs’

identity, such efforts paradoxically feed into the further categorization of “good” Uyghurs and “bad” Uyghurs.

A glance at de-radicalization programs in Western Europe reveals some similar, at least superficial, attempts to encourage Muslims to assimilate into the host countries. For example, the Prevent strategy in the UK was criticized for its emphasis on “British values” and otherwise those who do not know how to practice “Britishness” (Qurashi 2018). In France, an experimental “Center for Prevention, Integration, and Citizenship” was designed to teach radicalized individuals to develop “republican values” by learning French history, philosophy, literature, and so on, and through wearing uniforms and singing France’s national anthem every day. The same logic that underpins these similar efforts in different polities rests on a fundamentally fallacious understanding that there is a “correct” corpus of values which should be chanted to counteract the “wrong” radical ideology propagated by religious extremists (Crowell 2017).

While critical reflection is not entirely absent from Chinese academia, they had limited influence on how local governments implemented the de-radicalization policy. In practice, local governments are often under pressure to broaden the definition of “illegal religious activities,” a label that, using the language of Mao Zedong, might eventually turn the “contradiction among the people” into “contradiction between ourselves and the enemy.” In a broader context, the state has been plunging resources into the economic development of the Xinjiang region, and investing heavily in equipping the region digitally for a high level of social control. Its iron-fist efforts in maintaining social stability have so far ensured an ostensible peace—no terrorist incident since 2016. The sustainability of the peace and the prospect of Han-Uyghur relations depend on the CCP’s willing to resist the laziness to label Muslims as either “good” or “bad,” and work more carefully with the religious sector to restore trust with Uyghurs.

NOTES

1. Xinjiang has a population of 21.81 million in 2010 and 26,000 mosques in 2003. Turkey has a population of 84.17 million and 82,693 mosques in 2020.

2. Meshrep is a form of cultural gathering practiced by Uyghurs.

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