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# **Language, Religion, and Surveillance**

**A Comparative Analysis of China's Governance**

**Models in Tibet and Xinjiang**

## Language, Religion, and Surveillance: A Comparative Analysis of China's Governance Models in Tibet and Xinjiang

### Introduction

The region of Xinjiang is both socially and geographically located on China's periphery. Bordering Afghanistan, Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Russia, Xinjiang has historically been China's main route to Central Asia. Xinjiang is home to a variety of ethnic groups, with the largest being the predominantly Muslim Uighurs. The role of the Uighurs in Xinjiang has become increasingly complicated in recent decades due to the growing migration of Han Chinese to Xinjiang following the 1949 victory of Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese civil war. As Uighurs slowly run the risk of becoming an ethnic minority in Xinjiang, the tensions between Han settlers and Uighurs have resulted in various ethnic clashes over the past years (Qinji, 2016). From the 2010s onwards, China has begun to ramp up its repression of the Uighurs, including through the large-scale detainment of Uighurs in internment camps in which Uighurs are systemically abused and forced to forego their allegedly '*separatist*' ideologies. These demographic and social shifts have further alienated the local minority populations and reinforced international perceptions of China as a revisionist and hostile political actor.

In many ways, the situation in Xinjiang seems similar to that in Tibet. In both Tibet and Xinjiang, the Han Chinese, who account for 92% of the overall population of mainland China, are an ethnic minority (University of North Carolina, 2021). The Confucian traditions prevalent in most of China are less pronounced in Tibet, the home of Tibetan Buddhism, and Xinjiang, where Sunni Islam is the dominant religious affiliation. Both regions have also had fluid political relations with Chinese dynasties in the past, often enjoying decade and century-long political autonomy or de-facto independence (van Schaik, 2011; Wani, 2021). Although Tibet and Xinjiang are not the only places within China in which the Han are a minority, the cultural differences between the Han and other ethnic groups are specifically pronounced here. The legal status of Tibet and Xinjiang as autonomous regions (Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR)) formally also grants TAR and XUAR significant political autonomy within China. The role of Tibet and Xinjiang in modern China is consequently comparable on different levels.

This paper contrasts the Chinese governance model in TAR and XUAR to identify similarities and differences in how China has sought to govern and control both regions. Conceptually, this paper makes use of securitization theory to illuminate how the Party's governance model has been justified by framing TAR and XUAR as places in which China's national security is threatened. This paper focuses on three key policy areas in which this securitization logic is observable: (1) minority language policy, (2) minority religion policy, and (3) surveillance policy. The paper finds that the way in which minority languages and religions are treated in TAR and XUAR overlap heavily and share the aim to re-shape the distinct ethnocultural identities of TAR and XUAR towards an identity that is more in line with the political interests of the Party. The extent to which these ethnoreligious identities are seen

as a threat, however, differs, meaning that the securitization policies are more severe in Xinjiang than they are in Tibet.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the paper discusses securitization theory and examines governmental discourse on TAR and XUAR, highlighting that alleged separatist tendencies in TAR and XUAR are viewed as necessitating governmental policies that strengthen Party rule. After reviewing the legal framework surrounding minority rights in China, the paper contrasts how this securitization plays out in practice in the fields of language policies, religious policies, and surveillance policies. The paper concludes that repression is more pronounced in Xinjiang as religion is seen as more of a national security threat than in Tibet.

### **Securitization theory and securitization discourse on TAR and XUAR**

Securitization theory examines how the discursive construction of issues as security threats justifies specific political responses. First developed by Barry Buzan, Jaap de Wilde, and Ole Wæver in 1997, securitization theory contends that security threats (for instance to national security) do not necessarily exist objectively but undergo a process of social construction. Through this process of social construction, observable in the rhetoric and discourse employed by political actors such as States, the respective issue is elevated from a mere political issue to an issue that is pivotal to the security of the political unit. Securitization theory consequently implies that political issues are ordered hierarchically, with the supposed threats to the State's national security being seen as more important than more *'regular'* political issues. The social construction of an issue as a security threat takes place via the performative speech act,

*“[T]hrough which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object [such as the state, the economy, social cohesion, etc.], and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 491).*

For an issue to be successfully securitized, it must be *“presented as an existential threat to the security of the state, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure”* (Buzan et al., 1997, p. 24). Successful rhetorical-discursive securitization consequently enables a set of specific political responses that address the presumed threat. What constitutes part of the *'normal bounds of political procedure'* is, of course, heavily context dependent. What may be normal in North Korea, for instance, is presumably not normal in, say, Sweden. Crucially, the threat perception created through the discourse of the securitizing actor must be salient enough to warrant the focusing of *“society's energy and resources on a specific task”* (ibid). Security threats and political responses thereto consequently do not exist in a social vacuum: through securitization, security becomes *“a self-referential practice, because it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue - not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat”* (Buzan et al., 1997, p. 24). This does not necessarily mean that *'real'* security threats do not exist - how they are dealt with, however, is determined by the securitizing behavior of political actors.

In Tibet, China's securitization discourse has framed the separatism allegedly pursued by the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, as the main threat to Tibet's (and China's) social cohesion. In 2015, President Xi Jinping pledged to fighting "*an unswerving anti-separatism battle*" in Tibet, demanded increased efforts to promote "*patriotism among the Tibetan Buddhist circle and effectively manage monasteries in the long run, encouraging interpretations of religious doctrines that are compatible with a socialist society*" and suggested that governmental campaigns should promote ethnic unity and a sense "*of belonging to the same Chinese nationality*" (quoted in Blanchard, 2015). Naturally, Xi's position in the CCP indicates that these statements do not just reflect his personal stance but Party policy line. This anti-Lama position precedes Xi's role as President: during his time as Vice President, Xi argued in a 2011 visit to Tibet that the CCP,

*"[S]hould thoroughly fight against separatist activities by the Dalai clique by firmly relying on all ethnic groups... and completely smash any plot to destroy stability in Tibet and jeopardise national unity [...] The extraordinary development of Tibet over the past 60 years points to an irrefutable truth: Without the Chinese Communist Party, there would have been no new China, no new Tibet"* (quoted in BBC, 2011).

The position expressed by Xi has been echoed by regional administrators. In 2017, Che Dalha, Tibet's governor, said the government was going to "*hold a clear-cut stand against separatism, resolutely strike against the Dalai clique's damaging and separatist activities*" (quoted in Reuters, 2017). The anti-separatist statements of Che and Xi indicate that the distinct cultural-religious identity of Tibetans and their spiritual-religious connection to the Dalai Lama continues to be seen as potential breeding ground for separatist tendencies. According to this logic, the cultural assimilation of Tibetans would weaken the influence of the Dalai Lama and enhance societal cohesion in Tibet (and ultimately China as a whole). In Tibet, allegedly Lama-supported separatism thus emerges as the main focal point of the Party's securitization discourse.

In addition to separatism, alleged extremist and terrorist tendencies feature heavily in the CCP's securitization discourse on Xinjiang. The intensification of a securitization logic in Xinjiang has become more visible after 2009, when ethnic riots between Han Chinese and Uighurs escalated in Ürümqi, the capital of XUAR, resulting in the death of 197 protesters (Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2019). 2014 saw further attacks in Ürümqi and Kunming in Yunnan Province that Chinese authorities blamed on the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a militant group presumably based in XUAR (BBC, 2014; Neild, 2014). Epitomizing the government's position, the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic (FMPRC) released a statement in 2020 that suggested that,

*"Xinjiang had suffered long and deep from terrorism and extremism. Statistics show that from 1990 to 2016, ethnic separatists, religious extremists and violent terrorists plotted and conducted several thousand violent terrorist cases and incidents, killing a large number of innocent civilians and several hundred police officers, and causing immeasurable property losses. These incidents inflicted untold sufferings on the people of various ethnic groups in Xinjiang"*.

The attacks and the alleged religious element of these attacks has culminated in Xinjiang being the main space for what Xi has called the ‘three forces’ of separatism, extremism, and terrorism. Leaked CCP-internal documents highlight that the threat of the three forces is viewed as imminent. In his communication with regional authorities in XUAR, Xi contended that “*East Turkestan’s terrorists who have received real-war training in Syria and Afghanistan could at any time launch terrorist attacks in Xinjiang*” (quoted in Ramzy & Buckley, 2019). This sense of immediacy of terrorist attacks, in turn, vindicates preventive measures. The 2020 FMPRC statement goes on to suggest that unspecified measures implemented in XUAR,

*“[H]ave effectively curbed the rising trend of frequent terrorist activities and protected people’s right to life, right to health, right to development and other basic rights to the maximum extent. These measures have received full support from people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang”.*

This sentiment has also been mirrored by Xi in a 2021 speech in front of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: “*We need to pursue common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, and take tough actions against the ‘three forces’ of terrorism, separatism and extremism, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement*”. A security-focused lens that justifies presumably appropriate security measures is consequently openly prevalent in how the CCP conceptualizes the situation in Xinjiang and justifies its policy responses.

In sum, a distinct securitization logic is at play in how China frames and responds to political developments in Tibet and Xinjiang. The cultural-religious otherness of TAR and XUAR relative to the Han-dominated remainder of China is identified as a potential security threat. This threat perception regarding Tibet and Xinjiang is remarkably consistent with that of previous Chinese polities that frequently thought of their western regions as potential entry points for foreign incursions and ideological challenges (Hayton, 2020). For the CCP, national unity and cohesion is inextricably linked with national security, meaning that a decrease/loss of national unity inevitably equals a decrease/loss of national security. This could incentivize an increased emphasis on what Dwyer (2005) has aptly called ‘*monoculturalism*’: the creation of an assimilationist, Han-dominated culture that comes at the expense of minority cultures.

### **Minority rights in China: the legal framework**

Formally, ethnic minorities are protected by China’s constitutional framework. TAR and XUAR are part of a total of five autonomous regions (ARs) that are home to large ethnic minority groups. Other ARs include Guanxi, Inner Mongolia, and Ningxia. ARs enjoy more legal autonomy than other administrative entities in China, including the 23 provinces in which most of contemporary China is divided. Article 116 of the current version of the Chinese Constitution, adopted during the Thirteenth National People’s Congress in March 2018, elaborates on the specific rights of ARs:

*“The people’s congresses of ethnic autonomous areas shall have the power to formulate autonomous regulations and local-specific regulations in accordance with the political, economic and cultural characteristics of the ethnic groups in their areas.*

*The autonomous regulations and local-specific regulations of autonomous regions shall go into effect after submission to the National People's Congress Standing Committee and receipt of approval. The autonomous regulations and local-specific regulations of autonomous prefectures and autonomous counties shall go into effect after submission to the standing committees of the people's congresses of their provinces or autonomous regions and receipt of approval, and shall be reported to the National People's Congress Standing Committee to be placed on record" (The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2018).*

The rights of ARs are further enshrined in the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law (REAL), which grants ARs comparatively more control over economic development policies, public security, and natural resource management than China's provinces (Zhang, 2012). On paper, then, ethnic minorities in ARs enjoy significant legal autonomy.

The Chinese Constitution additionally includes provisions concerned with governing the social relations between different ethnic groups. The Chinese government currently recognizes 56 *minzus* ('nationalities') that include groups as ethnically diverse as the Han, Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, and Uighurs. An ethnic group being recognized as a *minzu* entitles it to protection by the Chinese Constitution (Ma, 2017). Article 4 of the Constitution stipulates that,

*"All ethnic groups of the People's Republic of China are equal. The state shall protect the lawful rights and interests of all ethnic minorities and uphold and promote relations of equality, unity, mutual assistance and harmony among all ethnic groups. Discrimination against and oppression of any ethnic group are prohibited; any act that undermines the unity of ethnic groups or creates divisions among them is prohibited.*

*The state shall, in light of the characteristics and needs of all ethnic minorities, assist all ethnic minority areas in accelerating their economic and cultural development.*

*All ethnic groups shall have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and to preserve or reform their own traditions and customs" (The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2018).*

This rhetorical commitment to ethnic equality is also present in other governmental publications. China is a prime example of what Wu Guoguang (1995) called 'documentary politics', describing a structure in which government policies and elite positions are frequently expressed in documents rather than laws. The following document, published by the FMPC (n.d.), includes the pledge to safeguard minority interests, including the rights to maintain minority languages, against Han-"*chauvinism*":

*"Equality, unity, mutual help and common prosperity are the basic principles of the Chinese government in handling the relations between ethnic groups. The Constitution of the PRC specifies that all ethnic groups are equal. The state guarantees the lawful rights and interests of the minority peoples. Discrimination against or oppression of any ethnic group is prohibited; all acts that undermine the unity of the ethnic groups or create splittism among them are forbidden. Big-ethnic group chauvinism, mainly*

*Han-chauvinism, or chauvinism on a local level, is banned. Every ethnic group has the freedom to use its own spoken and written languages, and to retain or change its customs. [...] In accordance with these basic policies, China practices a system whereby national minorities exercise regional autonomy. Where national minorities live in compact communities autonomous organs of self-government are established under the unified leadership of the Central Government. The minority people shall exercise autonomous rights”.*

The Chinese Constitution and FMPRC document highlight the CCP’s rhetorical commitment to protecting the cultural rights of minority groups, including the safeguarding of minority languages and minority practices. In support of this, Article 21 of the REAL reads that,

*“While performing its functions, the organs of self-government of a national autonomous area shall, in accordance with the regulations on the exercise of autonomy of the area, use one or several languages commonly used in the locality; where several commonly used languages are used for the performance of such functions, the language of the nationality exercising regional autonomy may be used as the main language” (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, 2001).*

The REAL’s Article 37 also includes a provision on the relation between minority cultures and educational institutions, stating that,

*“[S]chools (classes and grades) and other institutions of education where most of the students come from minority nationalities shall, whenever possible, use textbooks in their own languages and use their languages as the media of instruction” (ibid).*

Provisions for the protection of minority rights and practices do subsequently exist on several levels in China’s various overlapping legal frameworks. It is notable here that the Party shows awareness of the ethnic dimension of domestic politics, for instance in their identification of Han-chauvinism as a factor that could potentially undermine social cohesion. In theory at least, minority rights feature prominently in China’s legal framework.

While the government also grants religious freedom to minorities in China, this freedom is accompanied by a high degree of State control. The Party recognizes five main religions in China: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism (Maizland, 2021). Article 36 of the Constitution highlights that,

*“Citizens of the People’s Republic of China shall enjoy freedom of religious belief.*

*No state organ, social organization or individual shall coerce citizens to believe in or not to believe in any religion, nor shall they discriminate against citizens who believe in or do not believe in any religion.*

*The state shall protect normal religious activities. No one shall use religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the state’s education system.*

*Religious groups and religious affairs shall not be subject to control by foreign forces”* (The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, 2018).

A few points are worth noting here. Firstly, while granting religious freedoms, the Constitution permits only ‘*normal*’ religious activities - what constitutes normal, however, is not defined. The subsequent ambiguity means that policy implemented on the ground can be modified to serve the (perceived) needs of the moment. Moreover, religious expressions are desired not to interfere in the public structures of the Party, for instance in the context of the national education system. The constitutional framework is furthermore explicitly hostile towards any ‘*foreign forces*’, meaning that any religious development within China is to remain an inextricably Chinese affair. Religion is evidently perceived as an entry point for foreign interference, reflecting the violent historical legacy of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), the leader of which claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ (Kilcourse, 2014). In the words of Martin Lavička (2021), Chinese government legislation seeks to “*de-internationalize religious practices in China by constraining international cooperation and potential foreign influence in religious matters*” (p. 71). While granting religious freedom on paper, China’s constitutional framework regarding religion is thus geared towards ensuring and maintaining governmental control.

In line with the commanding position held by the Party in modern China, the legal framework surrounding minority rights creates significant legal ambiguity in how the relations between the Party and ethnic minorities are to be structured in practice. Article 4, for example, suggests that the CCP can “*assist all ethnic minority areas in accelerating their economic and cultural development*” (The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). Crucially, it is the Party rather than the ethnic minorities that defines what constitutes ‘cultural development’. Party hegemony is also reflected in Article 121: “*In performing their duties, autonomous organs of ethnic autonomous areas shall, in accordance with the autonomous regulations of that ethnic autonomous area, use the spoken and written language or languages commonly used in that area*” (ibid). Here again, autonomy is granted to some extent. Yet, the usage of minority languages is extended to autonomous organs rather than Party organs per se, creating space for a two-tiered system in which minority languages are sidelined at the expense of *Putonghua* (‘Standard Chinese/Mandarin’), the Mandarin used by the CCP (Han & Johnson, 2021). While rhetorically protected in the constitutional framework and the documentary politics frequently employed by the CCP, the practical legal relations between the Han-dominated center and minority areas, especially in the ARs, are often ambiguous.

### **Language policies in TAR and XUAR**

Language is a key space in which communal and individual identity plays out and serves as a means of communicating cultural-specific interpretations of the past, present, and future. Language, in other words, is key for the creation (and modification) of communal and individual identity. As a result, language policy obtains a key role in how identities are (re)constructed. As Dwyer (2005) notes,

*“Though language policy rarely makes headlines, it is a central tool in national consolidation and permeates all aspects of society. Language policy affects the domains, status, and use of language varieties and the rights of their speakers. It shapes the media, the education system, and provides a rallying point for or against ethnic identity; it is in turn shaped by economic, social, and geopolitical considerations”* (p. 6).

Language policy is consequently never politically and ideologically neutral and can facilitate the reinforcement of hegemonic power structures (Han & Johnson, 2021). Given that the otherness of TAR and XUAR is seen as a potential security threat by the Party, it is worth considering how the Party has structured its language policy in both ARs.

On a general domestic level, the Party makes use of a practically three-tiered language system that reinforces the hegemonic role of *Putonghua*. *Putonghua* is China’s official national language spoken by Party cadres throughout the country. The CCP also recognizes some minority languages, including Tibetan and Uighur, that are widely spoken in ARs and other areas with significant ethnic minorities. Legal recognition by the Party translates into these languages being used alongside *Putonghua* by CCP authorities in the ARs. The official usage of minority languages in ARs is subsequently coupled to their status as recognized minority languages. Minority languages that lack this recognized status subsequently enjoy no legal protection. It must be noted here that there are far more minority languages (and dialects of those minority languages) than there are *minzus* recognized by the government. *Minzus* and their languages are therefore treated as largely homogenous cultural-linguistic units, ignoring the extent of linguistic diversity existent in these languages and cultures (Roche, 2019). The recognition-based system consequently creates a hierarchy that does not just prioritize *Putonghua* over minority languages but also prioritizes recognized minority languages over non-recognized ones, granting the CCP significant linguistic control over the development of languages.

The language policies in TAR embody this prioritization of *Putonghua* over Tibetan in Tibet’s administrative and educational system. The teaching of classes in *Putonghua* throughout all educational levels had been pervasive throughout the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which the linguistic diversity of ethnic minority regions was viewed as a threat to the Han-dominated national unity envisioned by Mao (Dwyer, 2005). Here, linguistic divergence became cognitively linked to political dissidence and divisiveness. The turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, Mao’s death in 1976 and the rise of the more moderate Deng Xiaoping led to a period of relative reconciliation in the 1980s. The Deng government adopted a more gradual approach that permitted the increased teaching of Tibetan in primary schools during the 1980s and 1990s (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Even then, however, Tibetan did not become a language of instruction in higher educational institutions (ibid). The subsequent marginalization of Tibetan languages in TAR’s educational system was further formalized by the 2000 Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language, which stipulated that,

*“The standard spoken and written Chinese language shall be used in such a way as to be conducive to the upholding of state sovereignty and national dignity, to unification*

*of the country and unity among all ethnic groups, and to socialist material progress and ethical progress. [...] The State promulgates standard norms of the spoken and written Chinese language, administers its use in the community, and supports the teaching of and scientific research in the language so as to promote its normalization, enrichment and development”* (The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, 2000).

The formulation of national language policies set the base for the further consolidation of *Putonghua* as the central language of instruction, including in TAR. The legislation notably highlights the disconnect between the protection formulated in the Chinese Constitution and the formulation of piecemeal legislation that runs in opposition to the Constitution. From 2002 onwards, the State Council, China’s main legislative body, further issued several directives ordering CCP officials in minority areas to promote bilingual education without noting how minority languages and *Putonghua* should be balanced or what language should serve as the predominant medium of instruction. In October 2014, the Central Party Committee further released a document that urged officials in ARs to “*fully popularize the national language*”, “*resolutely push forward education in the national language and script*” and “*fully hold classes in the national language*” (Human Rights Watch, 2020). On a regional level, TAR administrators repeatedly noted that bilingual education was being implemented and could be seen as a success without classifying what this meant in practice. It is notable here that the language policy frameworks became more restrictive towards minority languages after Xi entered office in 2013. The shift in rhetorical assertiveness, also observable in other components of China’s interior and foreign policy, reflects the increasingly nationalist, Han-dominating line the CCP has taken under Xi.

In effect, these policy measures and the prosecution of language advocates have resulted in the increased side-lining of Tibetan. While the teaching of Tibetan in primary schools means that a basic level of the language is preserved, the national and regional focus on *Putonghua* means that the career prospects of individuals in TAR are linked to the command of *Putonghua*. In practice, this incentivizes the teaching and learning of *Putonghua*, relegating Tibetan and its various dialects to a largely marginal role. The government has buttressed this marginalization through the prosecution of individuals that advocate for the enhanced teaching of Tibetan in schools in TAR. In 2016, the language advocate Tashi Wangchuk was given a five-year sentence on charges of “*inciting separatism*” (Deutsche Welle, 2021). Cultural and linguistic autonomy is subsequently treated as synonymous with separatism, highlighting the prevalence of a securitizing logic.

The formulation of language policies on a national rather than regional level means that Xinjiang has witnessed a comparable trajectory. Here too, Deng’s Reform Era during the 1980s resulted in a relative liberalization of the CCP’s language policies, for instance permitting the re-introduction of the Arab script as a code of writing (Dwyer, 2005). At the same time, policies from the mid-1990s focused on gradually substituting the use of Uighur in educational institutions with *Putonghua* (ibid). In 2002, the Ürümqi-based Xinjiang University abolished the usage of Uighur at the expense of *Putonghua* (Schluessel, 2007). As in Tibet, this means that economic prospects of individuals and communities become coupled to the command of

Standard Mandarin. For members of non-Han minority groups, this incentivizes participation in educational institutions that have less autonomy from the CCP. Again, the notion of bilingual education turns out to be more of a rhetorical tool rather than an actual policy line. As in Tibet, the repression against language advocates has increased under Xi (Shir, 2019) and measures pushing for the usage of *Putonghua* in minority schools have intensified, too (Roche & Leibold, 2020). The formulation of language policy on a national rather than regional level here means that the development of language policies in Tibet and Xinjiang have largely followed the same trajectory, indicating an overarching surge of pressure on minority languages.

The displacement of minority languages in Tibet and Xinjiang with *Putonghua* in the educational sector runs the risk of imperilling the long-term survival of minority languages. Roche (2019) highlights that language oppression is consistent with other forms of oppression. The erasure of language through what Roche calls ‘*linguicism*’ serves to undermine the minorities’ identity in the cultural memory and impairs their ability to construct a socio-political future on their own terms. Language policy in Tibet and Xinjiang consequently reasserts and reinforces the hegemonic power relations between the central government and the ethnic minorities in these regions: “*Putonghua is privileged, minority languages subordinated and marginalized, and non-recognized languages are slated for elimination through a broad project of malevolent neglect, rooted in discursive erasure*” (Roche, 2019, p. 499). The language policy employed in TAR and XUAR consequently serves the ultimate aim of cultural assimilation.

This desire to assimilate Tibetans and Uighurs can be contextualized via the Party’s securitization logic. Tibet and Xinjiang’s apparent cultural otherness are seen as breeding grounds for separatist tendencies, making the erasure of these cultural markers the equivalent to ensuring national unity and security in the minds of Chinese policymakers. In this sense, the practices and motivations for China’s securitization practices in TAR and XUAR are comparable.

### **Religious policies in TAR and XUAR**

The comparatively high threat perception of the Chinese State in XUAR relative to TAR is epitomized in the way religion is treated in both regions. The extent to which religion is seen as a threat to the internal cohesion of the Chinese State produces comparable but also slightly diverging policy responses, with religious repression being more pronounced in Xinjiang.

In Tibet, devotion to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism continues to be treated as practically synonymous with political separatism. The CCP has had a historically uneasy relationship with Tibet, justifying its 1951 annexation with seeking to liberate the Tibetans from what was (and is) framed as the theocratic, feudalistic serfdom of Lama rule (Xinhua, 2021). Naturally, the atheism of the Party continues to juxtapose the role Tibetan Buddhism still plays in Tibetan society today. This ideological disconnect between the Party and Tibet was visible in the anti-religious violence of the Cultural Revolution and the thirteen-months imposition of martial law in 1989 (Cook, 2017a). Tibetan activists further utilized the growing global attention on China in the build-up to the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing as a platform

to stage further protests, to which the government responded with an expansion of its security presence, the curtailment of travel to and from Tibet, and the expansion of ‘*patriotic education*’ campaigns (ibid). Even before Xi’s ascendancy to the presidency, then, repression in Tibet had worsened over the first decade of the 21st century.

The Xi administration has led a further crackdown on Tibetan Buddhism that seeks to curtail Tibetan Buddhist practices and further challenges the ideological role of the Dalai Lama. From 2015 onwards, the CCP has begun to actively punish its cadres for engaging in Tibetan Buddhist practices (Cook, 2017a). The Party has also increasingly made use of collective forms of punishment to contain anti-Party protests. Self-immolation, for instance, has long been a key component of the repertoire of non-violent resistance in Tibet (Vehaba, 2019). To challenge this practice, the CCP has now begun to cut off investment funding for the villages of self-immolators, raising the opportunity costs for community members that seek to resist communist rule (Cook, 2017). As a result, both religious practice and the practice of passive political resistance have become criminalized. Repression consequently continues to be a main component of the CCP’s governance approach in Tibet.

It is notable, however, that the CCP seeks to control and co-opt rather than fully eradicate Tibetan Buddhism, at least in the short term. A key figure for the CCP projecting and exercising ideological control is the Panchen Lama, a main figure in Tibetan Buddhism that is also involved in the identification of the next Dalai Lama. In 1995, Chinese authorities abdicated a six-year-old child who had been designated as the Panchen Lama by Buddhist leaders in Tibet. In his stead, Chinese authorities installed a CCP-designated Panchen Lama, thereby inserting themselves into the identification and designation process of the next Dalai Lama. Until this day it is unclear where the original Panchen Lama is and whether he is still alive (Richardson, 2020). The forced disappearance of the Panchen Lama and his replacement with a Beijing-controlled figure highlights that a part of Beijing’s strategy is to re-shape Tibetan Buddhism in a way that is more consistent with the Party’s political aims. Cook (2017a) highlights that the CCP has six key policy objectives in its approach:

- (1) Weaken the bond between Tibetan monasteries and Tibetans
- (2) Detach Tibetan Buddhism from the influence of the Dalai Lama and other exiled religious leaders
- (3) Promote the influence of religious leaders that are loyal to the Party
- (4) Cultivate a Tibetan socioeconomic class with a less pronounced religious identity, for instance through language policies
- (5) Limit the size of the monastic community and reduce the quality of monastic education
- (6) Discourage identification with and protests in support of the Dalai Lama

To achieve these objectives, Cook (ibid) argues that the CCP has made use of the following measures:

- Extend surveillance over monasteries through practical surveillance (digital, in person) and enhanced oversight over financial records
- Use of patriotic education campaigns denouncing the Dalai Lama and fostering loyalty to the Panchen Lama/the CCP
- Restrain travel of Tibetans within and outside of Tibet
- Tightening of information controls (including internet blackouts, prosecution of (alleged) dissidents)
- Repression of protests, including the incarceration of protesters

In practice, then, the Party combines old-fashioned repression with a more co-opting approach that seeks to generate and maintain control over the ideological trajectory of Tibetan Buddhism. Repression against Tibetan Buddhists remains pervasive: according to the International Federation for Human Rights (2013), monks and nuns make 58% of Tibet's political prisoner population. These prisoners, as well as the Tibetans prosecuted for their purportedly separatist activities, are persecuted due to their religious beliefs, indicating that the religious freedom enshrined in China's Constitution does not apply on the ground, at least not to Tibetan Buddhists. Once again, the perceived linkage between Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, and Tibetan separatism indicates how governmental perceptions are shaped by a securitization logic and Tibetan claims of independence.

A comparatively higher threat perception in XUAR means that the Party's religious policies are even more interfering and repressive relative to Tibet. It is worth noting here that government authorities do not have as much of an issue with Islam as such rather than with the Uighur manifestation of Islam in Xinjiang. Other Muslim communities such as the Muslim Hui, who primarily reside in Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang, do not face the same degree of discrimination (Albert & Maizland, 2020). This may be due to the fact that the Muslim Hui are more culturally akin to the Han because of their use of Mandarin while the Uighurs speak a Turkic language and frequently write in Arabic (Al Jazeera, 2012). Indeed, religious repression does not coherently target the inhabitants of Xinjiang but Uighurs specifically. While Xinjiang is home to a large variety of ethnic groups (Mongols, Uighurs, Hui, Kazaks, Dongxiangs, Kyrgyz, Daur, Xibe, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Russians, and Tatars, according to the FMPRC (n.d.)), repressive measures are more pronounced in the southern prefectures (including Aksu, Hotan, and Kashgar), where most of the population is Uighur (Cook, 2017). Policies subsequently do not just target Muslims but especially Uighur Muslims.

As previously discussed, internal security incidents and subsequent threat perceptions have informed China's securitization approach in the region. Suspicions of Islamic extremism in Xinjiang are not novel to the 21st century: Deng's post-1978 Reform Era led to increased cultural interactions between Xinjiang and Pakistan via the Karakoram Highway, resulting in the growing influx of militant ideologies from Afghanistan and Pakistan from the late 1970s onwards (Wani, 2021). The perceived militant threat was exacerbated by the formation of ETIM, which is believed to have been created at some point in the 1990s (Roul, 2019). In combination with a global post-9/11 atmosphere that made the fight against Islamic extremism a political priority, the existence of ETIM served as a justification to crack down on supposedly

extremist groups in Xinjiang (Maizland, 2021). Reflecting the pervasiveness of this perceived terrorist threat, the United States supported ETIM's classification as a terrorist organization in front of the United Nations Security Council in 2002, a status that was only revoked in 2020 (Roberts, 2020). Until this day, it has been frequently questioned how much of a threat ETIM truly poses to security in Xinjiang (Xu et al., 2014). Within China, however, the alleged presence of ETIM and the execution of several attacks inside and outside of Xinjiang (Clarke & Kan, 2017) has created an atmosphere where the repression of alleged Uighur terrorists is not just seen as permissible but as desirable.

Chinese threat perceptions have also been shaped by external developments. Besides the 9/11 attacks, the CCP was alarmed by the surge in Islamic political movements in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring and the expansion of the Islamic State. The rise of political Islamic movements throughout the Middle East also saw Beijing deepen its relationships with autocratic Islamic countries, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, that sought to undermine the influence of dissident voices in their own countries (Wani, 2021). China's anxieties concerning the radicalization of Uighurs was seemingly confirmed when Uighurs were arrested as foreign fighters in the Middle East and Southeast Asia after having fought for terrorist organizations (Greitens et al., 2020). The developments associated with Islamist militancy elsewhere appeared to confirm the link between external actors, internal Uighur militancy, and the Islamic faith. As such, the religious practices of Uighur Muslims became increasingly seen as synonymous with extremism and terrorism.

This confluence of internal and external trends, centered around the theme of political Islam and Islamic extremism, has served as justification for a severe crackdown on Islamic practices in Xinjiang. 2015 and 2016 saw the passing of policies that constrained the wearing of headscarves, enforced the breaking of Ramadan for Uighurs, detained individuals for their consumption of religious digital content and introduced rules that prevented minors from partaking in religious activities (Cook, 2017). State authorities have also coerced Uighur stores to sell alcohol and tobacco while removing signs written in Arabic and "*tearing down Islamic domes [...] and silencing the outdoor call to prayer*" (Johnson, 2019). Surveillance has also expanded towards Uighurs that go to and return from Mecca (Cook, 2017). Repression against religious practices, more so than in Tibet, has consequently emerged as a key component of China's governance approach towards Islam in Xinjiang.

Indeed, the willingness to co-opt religion is significantly less pronounced in Xinjiang than it is in Tibet. In Tibet as in Xinjiang, the construction of religious buildings (such as mosques and shrines) must be previously approved by the Religious Affairs Department, which is also responsible for overseeing the appointments of religious leaders, including monks and imams (Lavička, 2021). In Xinjiang, religious activities, including praying, can only take place in venues registered with the government (Cook, 2017). As with Tibetan Buddhism, the Party thereby inserts itself into the political process of these faiths, granting Chinese authorities increased capacity to control developments from within. In both Tibet and Xinjiang, strict regulations on funding from abroad compounds the de-internationalization of religion envisaged by the Constitution. While this regulation of religious activities certainly overlaps

with the Party's approach in Tibet, the extent of repression on religious practices certainly differs.

In sum, the extent of repression is more pronounced in Xinjiang than it is in Tibet. In Tibet, China has coupled strategies of repression with strategies of co-option by seeking to influence religious processes and the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures going forward. In Xinjiang, in contrast, its policy is much more assimilationist in orientation and is designed to eradicate the Islamic religious elements that are thought to be the root of Uighur secessionism. Once again, this reflects that the threat of extremism and terrorism is viewed as less pronounced in Tibet, meaning that the securitized response is not as severe either. The extent of securitization is potentially also shaped by Chinese perceptions of Buddhism and Daoism as more intrinsically Chinese than Islam and Christianity, both of which are frequently viewed as heavily influenced by external actors (Johnson, 2019). Despite their superficial similarities, repression plays out in different forms due to the CCP perceiving religion as more of a threat in Xinjiang.

### **Surveillance policies in TAR and XUAR**

The different ways in which the Party has securitized religious identities in TAR and XUAR results in surveillance policies that are more pervasive and intrusive in Xinjiang than they are in Tibet. Notably, the surveillance campaigns in Xinjiang ramped up following the 2016 appointment of Chen Quanguo as Committee Secretary of the CCP in Xinjiang. Prior to his stint in Xinjiang, Chen had served as Party Secretary in TAR between 2011 and 2016. An intensification of repression in Tibet and Xinjiang has consequently coincided with the respective appointments of Chen in 2011 and 2016, and Chen has been among the primary sanction targets passed by the United States for his role in the creation of intrusive surveillance structures in Xinjiang. Since 2011, Chen (and the Party at large) have undergone a learning process: the surveillance techniques initially trialed by Chen in Tibet are now employed and expanded in Xinjiang.

In Tibet, the appointment of Chen saw the introduction of surveillance programs that heightened the presence of security forces in Tibetan communities. Following Chen's deployment from Hubei, where he had served as Acting Governor and Deputy Party Secretary, the CCP began deploying surveillance teams of a total of 21,000 Party cadres to Tibetan villages, ramping up the presence of physical security forces. According to a 2016 report by the Human Rights Watch, the tasks of these cadres were of a fundamentally ideological nature: the newly deployed agents,

*“have carried out intrusive surveillance of Tibetans in villages, including questioning them about their political and religious views, subjecting thousands to political indoctrination, establishing partisan security units to monitor behavior, and collecting information that could lead to detention or other punishment. Official reports describe the teams pressuring villagers to publicly show support for the ruling Communist Party and to oppose the Dalai Lama”.*

The behavior of the cadres, a result of the direct instructions made by their superiors, most notably Chen, reflects the notion that Tibetan separatism continues to derive from their cultural and religious otherness. Surveilling this otherness, the logic goes, becomes a means of enhancing the governmental ability to contain and control it.

Other measures taken by Chen, most prominently the creation of a grid-like surveillance infrastructure, have further compounded the reach of this surveillance program. The perhaps most pivotal policy introduced by Chen has been the creation of ‘convenience police stations’ in both rural areas and larger cities such as Lhasa, the capital of the TAR. Always staffed by between six and thirty officers and located no more than 500 meters apart from each other, convenience police stations create a structure that is organized like a grid and consolidates the physical presence of security forces in population centers, enhancing their capacity to surveil the Tibetan population and detain alleged dissidents (Zenz & Leibold, 2017). The growing surveillance pressure has also seen China replicate a colonial governance approach in which hegemonic political units have incentivized ethnic populations to spy on co-ethnics for supposed violations (ibid). The growing presence of Chinese security forces is further exacerbated by the recruitment of Party-backed ‘*Red Armband Controls*’, groups of volunteers that patrol the streets in the name of public order (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Under Chen’s administration, Party surveillance in Tibet has expanded dramatically, rendering physical surveillance an increasingly dominant component of public life in TAR.

At the same time, Tibet has become a testing ground for more digitized forms of surveillance that make use of technological innovation and big data capacities, especially in the realm of facial recognition. The installation of convenience police stations has been accompanied by the enhanced usage of CCTV monitoring and surveillance equipment. The growing usage of CCTV systems in both rural and more urbanized areas makes extensive use of facial recognition software and China has also expanded its surveillance systems through the deployment of advanced radars, acoustic monitoring devices, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) (Coca, 2019). The use of highly developed surveillance equipment, predominantly developed and manufactured by State-affiliated enterprises such as Huawei, compounds the surveillance capacities created by the Chen administration. In Tibet, information technology has consequently emerged as a key component of the Party’s capacity to keep tabs on the movements and activities of the local population, creating an encompassing surveillance apparatus that combines digitized and non-digitized components of surveillance.

Following Chen’s deployment to Xinjiang in 2016, the Party has expanded and intensified the surveillance techniques that were first trialled on a large scale in Tibet. In Xinjiang too, convenience police stations have been installed and expanded in use. In 2017 alone, only one year into his position, Chen had advertised 90,866 security-related positions, 95% of which were to be employed in the 750 convenience police stations Chen had begun to construct throughout Xinjiang (Zenz & Leibold, 2017). For comparison, the number of positions advertised by Chen were twelve times higher than the number of positions advertised following the 2009 riots in Ürümqi (ibid). This growing security presence and subsequent repression is also reflected in the number of Uighurs that have been detained by regional authorities: since Chen’s deployment, the number of Uighur detainees has grown by a factor

of ten (Millward & Peterson, 2020). Repression and surveillance in Xinjiang has grown dramatically.

Xinjiang has also developed into another space where the Party can employ its digitized surveillance techniques, making digitized and non-digitized surveillance an omnipresent component of life in Xinjiang. As in Tibet, the Party makes extensive use of facial recognition software, cell phone inspection software, remote cell phone tracking and technology that facilitates the gathering of personal information (i.e., banking activities and religious practices) and biometric data (Millward & Peterson, 2020). The extent of digitized surveillance, while building on Chen's work in Tibet, is thus even more all-encompassing than it is in Tibet. As Millward and Peterson (2020) observe, the Party presence in Xinjiang has come to embody the dystopian ideal of a total surveillance State that is enabled by technological innovation, granting the State full control over both the information and life of its citizens.

The ultimate epitome of China's repressive surveillance policies is, of course, the establishment of internment camps for alleged political dissidents. The first mass internment of Uighurs was reported in 2017, and China is now believed to have detained between 800,000 and two million Uighurs (Maizland, 2021). This scale of not just surveillance and active repression but mass internment is not visible in Tibet, where 'only' 321 Tibetans had been detained on separatist charges between 2012 and 2017 (Cook, 2017). The conditions in the camps in Xinjiang, commonly described by China as 're-education' camps, have emerged as the subject of immense scrutiny in recent years as former detainees have alleged that Chinese authorities make systemic use of rape, torture, and education campaigns to destroy the Muslim-Uighur identity (Hill et al., 2021). The Xinjiang Data Project, operated by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, further notes that up to 80,000 Uighur detainees have been conscripted as forced labor units in the Xinjiang-based manufacturing centers of both Chinese and non-Chinese firms (Xu et al., 2020). Party-directed human rights violations have consequently become an endemic part of civil life in Xinjiang. Repression and surveillance, notably, does not end following the end of detainment. A 2021 report by Amnesty International found that,

*“[A]ll former internees are under near-constant electronic and in-person surveillance, including invasive “homestays” by government cadres who monitor them and report “suspicious” behaviour. This could be peaceful religious practices, the use of unauthorized communications software (such as VPNs or WhatsApp), or purchasing an “unusual” amount of fuel or electricity. Freedom of movement for released internees is also heavily restricted, with a massive number of security forces patrolling the streets and operating thousands of checkpoints, euphemistically known as “convenience police stations”.*

The internment camps have come to embody Beijing's securitized governance approach towards Xinjiang and epitomize the all-encompassing nature of surveillance in the region. Detained and surveilled in camps, Uighurs are subjected to systematic humiliations designed to erode their ethnic and cultural identity. This concerted elimination of Uighur identity indicates the extent to which this identity is perceived as a threat by the Party.

The extent of surveillance in Xinjiang and the presence of internment camps marks the main difference in how the Party governs Tibet and Xinjiang respectively. This is, of course, not to say that surveillance and repression in Tibet is not also pervasive. Indeed, the techniques employed by the CCP overlap significantly and are heavily tied to the governance model of Chen, who trialled the measures now implemented in Xinjiang during his time in Tibet. The similarities in governance conduct, however, should not detract from the significant differences that are at play. Digitized and non-digitized surveillance is much heavier in Xinjiang than it is in Tibet, which is also not witness to the large-scale internment and human rights abuses observable in Beijing's 're-education' camps. As astutely put by Robert Barnett (2021), the overlap in policies employed in Tibet and Xinjiang,

*“[R]eflect the shared repertoire of Communist jargon and history from which all CCP officials draw, as well as their adherence to the CCP’s overall policy regarding nationalities, which has shown an increasingly assimilationist approach since 2014. However, despite their constant declarations of unity with the Party Center, regional officials are not expected to implement the Center’s policies in identical ways in each region [Tibet and Xinjiang]”.*

This divergence in practical conduct can be viewed as a result of the different degrees of securitization that are at play: Tibet is seen as a space in which China's national security is less impaired. Another factor in the relative restraint shown by the CCP is the global support for Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama (Torjee, 2021). The Uighurs do not have access to the same level of international support, especially as many Muslim countries continue to rely on Chinese investment and are thus hesitant to openly voice their support for co-religionists. While the repression models of ethnic minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang subsequently show some overlaps and are therefore comparable in some ways, it is less comparable in how far the Party is willing to push its repression.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that China approaches its relations with Tibet and Xinjiang through a securitized lens that views the ethno-cultural identity of Tibetans and Uighurs as a threat to its political stability and its social cohesion. This perception is at play in both regions. The extent to which this perception permeates Chinese policymaking, however, differs. The subsequent divergence in how pervasive linguistic and religious oppression as well as surveillance can be seen as a result of this conception of Xinjiang as the main space for the three forces of separatism, extremism, and terrorism. In Tibet, in contrast, the issue is 'only' seen as that of separatism. Securitization here works in levels and differs in the degree to which an issue is perceived as a security threat.

This divergence in perception also produces different prospects for the future of Tibetans and Uighurs. In Tibet, assimilation through co-option remains an opportunity. In Xinjiang, in contrast, the signs appear to point towards assimilation through cultural erosion. Despite their differences, both trends threaten the unique nature of Tibetan and Uighur culture

in China. Under Xi, the Party has firmly removed itself from the gradualist approach of Deng Xiaoping.

If Xi has his way of consolidating the control of the Han over China, Tibetans and Uighurs face the very real prospect of cultural elimination in coming years.

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