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Criminals, Terrorists, and Outside Agitators: Representational Tropes of the ‘Other’ in the 5 July Xinjiang, China Riots

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This article is a critical geopolitical analysis of Chinese media representations of the 5 July 2009 riots in Xinjiang, China. Significant events often define the geopolitical climate by creating a space for the construction of boundaries between identity categories and the appropriate norms for behaviour towards the Other. The post-riot reports framed the event through the prism of the global war on terror to justify a violent response to protect Chinese citizens from the perceived threat of the Other. After connecting theories of narratives, the event, and group making, the article identifies three representational tropes – the criminal, the terrorist, and the outside agitator – in Chinese documents that create boundaries between the identity categories Uyghur and Han and define how the Other should be treated. The three representation tropes of the Other in the aftermath of the 5 July riots simultaneously situate the protestors as outside Chinese society and perpetuate the claim of the superiority of Chinese culture and civilisation.

INTRODUCTION

In the late afternoon of 5 July 2009, nearly 1,000 individuals who were identified as members of the ‘Uyghur’ minority group took to the streets of Urumqi in Xinjiang, China.¹ The demonstrators protested the Chinese government and its perceived ineffective investigation of a brawl at a toy factory in Guangdong Province on 25 and 26 June that left 2 people dead and 118 injured. As the protestors marched around the city of Urumqi, their numbers swelled and they soon turned their attention to members of the

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'Han' ethnic group.² The violent confrontations escalated after police forces arrived at the scene. According to official Chinese government reports, the riots left 197 dead and over 1,700 injured,³ making it the deadliest conflict in Xinjiang over the past few decades. International organisations that pursue Uyghur autonomy suggested that even more were killed, but the estimates vary.

This article demonstrates how Chinese media representations of the 5 July riots used narratives from the discourse of the global war on terror to justify a violent response to protect 'China' from the perceived threat of the Other. The construction of Chinese identity required the Chinese media and political institutions to define the Uyghur resistance as a psychological threat to the idea of a culturally superior Chinese 'nation.' Consequently, the only possible responses were for the state to frame the event through the representational tropes of the criminal, the terrorist, and the outside agitator, which simultaneously support Chinese cultural superiority while removing any legitimate reasons for challenging it.⁴ This paper does not argue that representations of the 5 July riots were necessarily discursively transformative, as each theme was previously deployed by the state, but rather it analyses why these narratives were used in this instance and examines their potential impact on the geopolitical construction of meaning and identity.⁵

Each of these representational tropes contained an embedded meaning that created divisions between identity categories and legitimised increased securitisation in Xinjiang. The criminal is the first representational trope that appeared in media and government reports about the riots. The projection of the criminal onto the Other, in this case the Uyghur, created an easily understood difference between the actors in the event. The criminal actions of the rioters was contrasted with the law-abiding citizen and the harbinger of justice – the Chinese state. These distinctions formed a hierarchical relationship between the group identity categories with the Han and the Chinese state's actions represented as more legitimate than those of the criminal Uyghur. The criminalisation of the Other in Xinjiang created an atmosphere of insecurity that was used to justify a heavy-handed response by the Chinese state and established the precedent for future actions.

The second representational trope deployed by Chinese media reports in the aftermath of the 5 July riots was the terrorist. The Chinese state has long warned that the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism, and extremism were a threat to Chinese unity. Extreme activities are represented as a break from what is conceived as acceptable activity in China, which must be rectified to maintain the dominance of the state and the majority group. By connecting the events in Xinjiang with the global war on terror, a discourse imbued with the fear of an evil and irrational Other, it furthered the perception of disorder and chaos, which required the intrusion of the Chinese security apparatus into Xinjiang.

The third representational trope of outside agitators emphasised the inside-outside binary of the state. By locating the cause of the conflict as outside the state, the Chinese state sought to maintain its position as the legitimate voice for all that live within its boundaries, including the minority populations. The goal was to project the responsibility for the riots as outside the state, diverting attention away from internal social policies in Xinjiang. Instead, in the official narrative, foreign interests with divisive goals instigated the violence, not minority citizens of China.

The representational tropes of the 5 July riots emerged through the interplay of narrative, the event, and security discourses within media and government reports. Narrative serves as the linguistic representation of the conflict after it occurred, embedded in a particular context of the reporting institution and containing the power to shape the post-riot atmosphere.⁶ These narratives function as projections of the current discourse of ethnic conflict in China as perceived by each reporting institution. The goal audience is not necessarily the local or the national, although these spaces of consumption are still important, but beyond the scope of this article. Rather, as Bovingdon suggests, many of these representations target the international community and reflect “the global currents . . . [of] the renewed significance of nationalism” and “the heightened perception of an Islamic threat in the non-Muslim world have combined to make the contention between Uyghur and the Chinese state an international, rather than a merely national, problem.”⁷ The focus here is on the external group-making processes, as the event of the riot is defined and categorised through the media narratives.⁸

This article draws on the literature in critical geopolitics and on Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis.⁹ Critical geopolitics analyses the social construction of the political world by investigating the narratives and actors that create representations of geopolitical space.¹⁰ Rather than accepting a fixed reality in the world, the focus is instead on how perceptions of reality are created for particular purposes. These invented worlds can entail both representations of territories and representations of people, which constitute the effort to categorise and define the subjectivity of an individual or a group. Once established and inscribed into the consciousness of a population, these geopolitical discourses act as disciplinary regimes of truth by shaping how events are understood and interpreted by the population.¹¹ Dalby argues that while critical geopolitics emerged in response to militarism at the end of the Cold War, “the codification of the appropriate geo-graph in the mappings of the war on terror had to wait for the events of 9/11 when the geography of danger coalesced into an explicitly imperial imaginary of a war against a ‘global’ threat.”¹² This article contributes to this expanding field by analysing the application of these geopolitical narratives to internal politics over territory in China.¹³

Critical discourse analysis examines the narrative construction of different versions of reality and the imbued meanings attached to specific

discursive frames.¹⁴ Through the interplay of distal and proximate contexts, espoused by Müller, we identify the process of identity construction via particular media sources at the macro level.¹⁵ Within the news reporting, we looked at the representational tropes, used to frame the riots and categorise the Other. Representational tropes are expressions that define entities – in this instance, group identity categories – in broad, general terms that establish how they are understood. These tropes served as geopolitical dividing marks, breaking the actors into group identity categories and differentiating them via an ‘us-them’ dialectic.

The scope of analysis is limited to the representations of the riots in 150 articles published 5–31 July 2009 in *China Daily* and *Xinhua* in order to focus the research on the initial responses to the incidents and the early discursive framing.¹⁶ As widely consumed and popular portrayals of events in China, these sources influence the embodiment of conflict via the ethnic lens and in the reification and reproduction of ethno-national identities, particularly for an international market. *Xinhua* was selected because it often acts as a political mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), thus providing insight to the perspective of the government authority in China. *China Daily* often serves the same purpose, to project the CCP’s policies via of the media. Additionally, *Xinhua* is one of the most read media sources within China, publishing a self-reported 15,000 online news stories per day,¹⁷ and its English-language version reaches those both in China and abroad. *China Daily* is an English-language news source, the largest in China, with a self-reported daily circulation of 200,000 of which *China Daily* notes includes one-third printed abroad.¹⁸

The 5 July riots in Xinjiang became an event that was embedded in the collective memories through the sensational representations in media reports. Each media and government source portrayed the event from their perspective, which has a major impact on the framing of reality and the shaping of future internal and international actions. Consequently, it is critical to understand what representational tropes were used in the media reports because these lenses often become the accepted popular version of what happened. The response to the Xinjiang riots and the contextual representation of the event created an atmosphere defined by the discourse of security and the threats posed by non-Chinese actors like criminals, terrorists, and outside agitators. These representational tropes established a clean, coherent explanation of why a superior Chinese culture was attacked, not by its own citizens, but by extremist and external groups that want to undermine it.

NARRATIVES, EVENTS, AND GROUP-MAKING

Conflict is a prevalent phenomenon in the contemporary world. One particular form is conflict between people who identify with particular identity

categories, especially when one of these categories is defined as a nation that has an enduring connection to a particular land as their homeland.¹⁹ In the past decade, much of this form of conflict between a majority state affiliated population and an internal Other was linked to the global war on terror, with the terrorist personifying the threat which the civilised world must resist.²⁰ However, these identities and cultures do not exist in perpetuity – they are socio-political constructs whose reproduction defines the phenomenon of modern identity conflict. As Mansbach and Rhodes argue:

The dramatic resurgence of identity politics since the end of the Cold War affirms that the ‘Cartesian coordinates’ are indeed ‘cracked,’ requiring a shift in geopolitical analysis away from conventional geography, territory, and physical distance toward a geopolitics based on mental maps of ‘we’ and ‘they,’ or toward a geopolitical analysis that focuses on the tension between the territorial maps of modern, Westphalian politics and the mental maps of identity.²¹

The narratives that support and solidify these group-identity categories often revolve around particular events that are cited and revisited until they are ingrained in collective memory of the population. As Castells argues “power struggles have always been decided by the battle over people’s minds, this is to say, by the management of processes of information and communication that shape the human mind”.²² The media often establish these spaces of power.

Narratives are created from a particular perspective based on an individual’s or an organisation’s experiences, history, and goals. Everyone experiences the world through a situated, contextual lens that develops through time and which is rooted in the locale and practices of life.²³ Narrative provides a perspective on reality, a perspective that impacts the subsequent understanding of what is real for individuals that obtain meaning from a particular representation. The representations of the event, the causes, and consequences are socially constructed and situated. Thus, the post-event reality is experienced through these constructions of what happened.

Though subjective, narratives create socially constructed identities and impact the sociopolitical atmosphere when they are caught up in the broader discourse. As Somers argues, “It is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities”.²⁴ For Somers, the narrative and the reality it creates direct social action of individuals exposed to that narrative. It is the narrative that provides meaning “and in doing so functions to both organize experience and guide action”.²⁵

In the context of an event, several forms of narrative exist, including those directly involved in it, those who witnessed it, individuals or organisations that are interested in shaping the understanding of it, and passive

observers that must sort out their understanding of what occurred. The news media, originally via print newspaper but more recently through television and the internet, is one of the main actors creating narratives of events that shape a large population's understanding of reality.²⁶

The media narrative serves to funnel understanding of the conflict through specific lenses, such as nationalism or terrorism. Eriksen argues the "media . . . play[s] an important part in the reproduction and strengthening of nationalist sentiments".²⁷ Brubaker takes the point further, arguing that "acts of framing and narrative encoding do not simply *interpret* the violence [conflict]; they *constitute* it as *ethnic*".²⁸ Narratives are not unbiased representations of reality; they work to construct the sociopolitical atmosphere and attach moral evaluations to action.²⁹ Brubaker emphasises that "when ethnic framing is successful, we may 'see' conflict and violence not only in ethnic, but in groupist terms".³⁰ By 'groupist' Brubaker means that the group connotation comes to be an essential lens by which the event is understood. Additional frames – such as terrorism – can replace that of '*ethnic*,' or alter its understanding.

When narratives frame the event as a conflict between separate distinct groups, they serve to reify the group identity and harden the dividing lines between them. These narrative representations of events are pulled from the discursive frames that are present in the current sociopolitical atmosphere, what Norman Fairclough calls performative and interactive discourse.³¹ Although individuals are often constrained by the broader sociopolitical discourses that drive society, individuals have the power to define, create, and reproduce the discourse.

Ó Tuathail and Agnew argue that geopolitical discourses are "sets of socio-cultural resources used by people in the construction of meaning about their world and activities".³² That is, discourse is the anthropogenic criteria by which an individual understands the socio-political space. Building on this concept, Müller argues that we must "conceptualize discourse not only as language, but also as language *and* practice".³³ Language serves to organise the space we inhabit by naming that space, but the practice of naming and the actions associated with the implementation of the naming are also important. Language and practice create the discourse and determines whether that discourse will take root in geopolitical imaginings. Müller continues by discussing the role of discourse in critical geopolitics, a role defined via the examination of the origins and effects of "geopolitical imaginations" and "geopolitical identities," functioning to serve the process of "imaginary spatial positioning".³⁴ Thus, the practice of discourse becomes paramount when combined with the power of the narrative to define how we interpret the world and the events that take place in that reality. Practice via daily interactions and the recitation of specific narratives reproduce the discourse.

Significant events often define the geopolitical climate by creating a space for the construction of boundaries between identity categories and

the appropriate norms for behaviour towards the other.³⁵ The traditional approach to theorising events is to see it as an occurrence that fundamentally alters the sociopolitical structure.³⁶ However, others have posited that events not only alter, but often reproduce existing norms, whether it alters the degree or not.³⁷ This is consistent with a post-structural view of events, in that there is no concept of a solid structure, only processes of which an event can be manifested within and through the narratives and practices that surround it.

This is clearly evident when observing the impact of an event like the 9/11 attacks in the United States on relations between people who associate themselves with different group identities. Post-9/11, one of the ramifications of this event is the increased division between what are described as the civilised Western world and the barbaric uncivilised places that foster terrorism.³⁸ These narratives of the enemy Other often draw heavily on fear of how different beliefs or values will affect a particular society.³⁹ The event is part of a cyclical and dynamic process leading to the crystallisation of group identity at certain points in time. This is especially evident when an event is attached to collective identities, creating an impetus for collective action.

Events are most often associated with radical change, which challenges and changes what is perceived as the status quo of the sociopolitical structure rooted in a particular location.⁴⁰ As Moore states, "Events are possible because the cultural categories that govern a society are continuously put at risk during social action".⁴¹ That is, the system that defined the categories of identity does not define the boundaries between these categories clearly, leaving space for conflict in everyday action among individuals aligned with a specific group identity.

The importance of events arises from individuals attaching symbolism to the event that makes the event salient in their understanding of the conflict. This is often the case when violence is present. As Tilly suggests, it is at this point that claim making becomes a powerful tool in constructing identity categories and defining what happened during a riot or other significant event.⁴² Violence changes the environment; it creates the aura of victimisation, vulnerability and struggle. It is the significance of these symbols that serve to "consolidate group identity".⁴³ That is, the symbolism of the violent event may harden the popular constructions of identity as the identity becomes attached to the violence and is reified by it.⁴⁴ This emotional attachment to an incident gives the event power in shaping the identification of individuals with the group identity and the ability to mobilise, to increase or decrease individual association to a particular group.

Significant events are the occurrences that fundamentally alter sociopolitical relations. Events serve to produce and re-produce signifiers of difference, particularly in the way the event is framed and narrated. Consequently, events are crucial in the process of identity formation and reproduction. The attachment of a shared interest becomes the signifier of

difference; the boundary where individuals associated with particular groups divided themselves from the other group.⁴⁵

CULTURE, CIVILISATION, AND CHINESE NATIONALISM IN XINJIANG

The conflict in Xinjiang is directly related to the role culture plays in Chinese nationalism.⁴⁶ To be Chinese, both historically and in the present, was to rid one of barbaric lifestyles and take on the tenets of civilisation defined by the Chinese. Chinese nationalism, then, should be understood as more than ethnicity, more than race, something closer to that of ‘culture’ and ‘civilisation.’ Modern Chinese national security is often viewed via this lens.

The Chinese Communist Party took the concept of a national identity based on civilisation and sought to incorporate the other people within China to fit this model. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Chinese leaders orchestrated the colonial style project of mapping and defining the Chinese territories. This is the beginning of the official Minority Policy, by which fifty-six nationalities were given definition in China, one being that of the Han identity – commonly seen as Chinese by the West – and the other fifty-five as national minorities.

Of particular importance, the Uyghur were, and continue to be, identified by the Minority Policy as a Central Asian people located in Xinjiang in the far west of China. The internal construction of the Uyghur identity is also important. Scholars⁴⁷ have studied, often through ethnographic research, the importance of the Uyghur homeland, religion and language as trappings of ‘Uyghur-ness’. While some⁴⁸ have argued that sociopolitical reality for Uyghur was defined at a local level, the modern era is defined by a relation of Uyghur identity to a land called ‘East Turkestan,’ especially by those that oppose the oppression of the Chinese state. Additionally, individuals that claim membership in the group manifest their Uyghur identity partially through their association with Islam. Language is another boundary upon which many Uyghur differentiate themselves from those outside the group, particularly the Han migrants – the Uyghur speak a Turkic language while most Han migrants speak Mandarin Chinese.

The Minority Policy was meant to identify ‘small nationalities’⁴⁹ in China that would be peacefully incorporated into national Chinese society; however, the actual application of the policy was marred by conflict. Since 1949, numerous cycles of government oppression and sociopolitical conflict in Xinjiang have occurred, including the anti-rightist campaign in 1957 and the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, both of which repressed ethnic minorities and non-Chinese nationalist movements.⁵⁰ After the death of Mao Zedong and the move to ‘reform and open,’ the CCP loosened its restrictions on minority populations and religious practice. However, with the loosening

of these controls came increased levels of resentment against the state by those who had formerly been oppressed. In response to the resentment, the CCP reinstated controls to limit what it perceived to be the radicalisation of the people living in Xinjiang. In response to violent uprisings in the province, the CCP began the Strike Hard campaign of the early 1990s, followed by a second, still continuing, Strike Hard campaign. The State initiated these campaigns to fight criminal and terrorist behaviour in Xinjiang, and, as a result, gained greater control over society.

From the perspective of the people in Xinjiang, the crackdowns and campaigns also served to reify ethnic and religious identities. The policies of the Chinese state, although not focusing on Uyghur minorities directly, conscript specific markers, such as religion, as targets of these campaigns.⁵¹ For example, Islamic schools – *madrasas* – are seen as harbouring terrorists and criminals, and are thus outlawed in Xinjiang. As Islam is often attached to Uyghur identity, attacking Islamic institutions generates a division between the identities of the state, the Han, and the Uyghur, creating a foundation for future conflict.

The CCP's official recognition of fifty-five national minorities in China, while motivated partially to mobilise support for the young Chinese state, served mainly to define the borders and differences between these groups. This institutionalisation of the Han and Uyghur group differences by the state has led to many contentious issues in Xinjiang, including Han migration into the region, control of Islam, and economic/social inequalities.⁵² Under the Western Development Policy, the CCP sought to modernise the infrastructure and economy of Xinjiang. This modernisation acted as an incentive for Han Chinese from eastern China to settle in the region and work for the development of China's western frontier.

As the province developed, most of the best jobs have been filled by migrants from the east, rather than by the Uyghur. There are reasons for this, such as the lack of Uyghur ability to communicate using Mandarin, the absolute numbers of the Uyghur compared to the Han in urban areas, particularly, and the lower education levels of the minority population.⁵³ However, the perception has been one of ethnic discrimination. The same applies to the state control of Islam. Individuals manifest their Uyghur identity partially through their association with Islam. Rhetoric of discrimination increases in Xinjiang whenever the CCP institutes greater control of Islamic practices and organisation.

REPRESENTATIONAL TROPES IN THE 5 JULY RIOTS

The 5 July riots became a major event that justified a security response in Xinjiang because it exacerbated the highly charged ethno-political atmosphere. Society in Xinjiang, while historically defined along ethnic terms

and via the lens of security, had actually seen a lessening of tensions prior to 2009. That is not to say that incidents did not occur, but most of the incidents that did occur were perpetrated by individuals and did not have the widespread ability to mobilise a larger portion of the population into action. The media representations of the 5 July riots and subsequent response by CCP contributed to the reemergence of tensions in Xinjiang. In speaking of an earlier riot in 1990, Brent Hierman states:

The decision to view the . . . uprising as embedded within a wave of contention does not downplay the significance of the event. . . . Indeed, for several reasons . . . [the] uprising should be seen as exceptional. It is reasonable to conclude. . . . that some previously passive Uighurs in other locations were inspired to engage in anti-state activities. Therefore, the event should be seen as a key moment in the activation of Uighur collective consciousness.⁵⁴

The 5 July riots performed the same function as this earlier riot. The narratives employed in representing the riots focused on constructing the group identities as actors and attaching specific tropes to these categories. As Hierman suggests, the exceptional event was defined as ethnic and with extensive exposure in the media has the ability to increase collective consciousness.

The division between the Chinese nation and state and the Uyghur served as the foundation for the security discourse in Chinese government representations of the 5 July riots. The conflict was most often described as ethnic conflict; however, the state (Chinese Communist Party, specifically) was also defined as a major player in the riots, but still separate from the ethnic identity categories of Han and Uyghur. The ethnic framing is evident in these reports about events on the days after the riots:

6 July – Individuals aligning themselves with the Uyghur identity roamed the streets ‘chanting slogans’ and ‘chasing Han Chinese.’⁵⁵

6 July – Individuals aligning themselves with the Han identity march towards Uyghur neighbourhoods to take revenge for the 5 July riot.⁵⁶

This is the crystallisation of group identity at a specific point in time, one marked by the event of the 5 July riots. In these news reports, the ethnic categories are emphasised which creates the perception that these identity categories were the central factor in the event.

The media reports, however, went further than simply describing the event in the language of group identity categories. They also attached specific representational tropes to these categories that signalled which actions caused the problem and which were justified responses. In these

representations, the boundaries between the barbaric and the civilised were drawn as the Uyghur identity category was linked to criminal activity, terrorism, and the actions of outside agitators, while the Chinese state and culture were positioned as superior and above the fray.

Criminals

Most states regularly employ the rhetoric of criminalisation when narrating specific phenomena that occur within the bounded state territory.⁵⁷ In Xinjiang and in China more generally, this narrative is often conscripted when looking at the national minorities, especially the Uyghur. The narratives surrounding the 5 July riots reiterated this representational trope, attaching the rhetoric of crime to the Uyghur identity category as played out in Xinjiang during the summer of 2009.

Numerous accounts found in *Xinhua* and *China Daily* used the representational trope of criminalisation to interpret the riots. A key actor in this was Nur Bekri, the regional governor of Xinjiang, who emphasised the criminal behaviour of the people involved in the event:

The violence is a preempted, organized violent crime. It is instigated and directed from abroad, and carried out by outlaws in the country.⁵⁸

It was a crime of violence that was premeditated and organized.⁵⁹

Other articles note that “mobsters,”⁶⁰ “thugs,”⁶¹ and “gangsters”⁶² were involved in the riots and were either killed by police or would be punished in the aftermath of the riots.

By criminalising the Uyghur identity category, the narrative constructed the Han identity category and Chinese state as opposed to that which was defined as Uyghur. This discourse is also imbued with a hierarchical relationship. The Han identity category becomes the peaceful, civilised, and law-abiding members of Chinese society, standing in contrast to the criminal Uyghur. The state then becomes the harbinger of justice, the creator and enforcer of the law. This places the Han identity category and the Chinese state above the Uyghur identity category.

The Chinese state, in fact, must manifest these characteristics, for the sovereign must be seen as upholding the laws that it creates, to protect the law-abiding citizens from the criminals that threaten civilised society. The modern state system is built upon the rule of law and justice, or at least perception of lawful order. The sovereign state within this system must uphold this responsibility of maintaining order.⁶³ Thus, the Chinese state must frame the rioters as criminals, not just to legitimise the heavy-handed response, but as a psychological necessity to protect what China defines as the nation.

Terrorism

The second important representational trope in the media reports about the 5 July riots was the three evils generally and terrorism specifically. Terrorism was the most common element; however, both separatism and extremism are mentioned in conjunction with terrorism in the reports. Even before the emergence of the discourse of the global war on terror, the Chinese state used the terrorist narrative as a means to legitimise security practices in Xinjiang. The Strike Hard campaigns explained above demonstrated the Chinese state's desire to use the rhetoric of terrorism to define the conflict in Xinjiang.

In the twenty-first century, the narratives of security and threat in the discourse of the global war on terror serve as a powerful force in the shaping of the political world order.⁶⁴ The state often defines itself as creating a safe and secure environment for those deemed part of the national body. Simon Dalby argues:

Security is about the future or fears about the future. It is about contemporary dangers but also thwarting potential future dangers. It is about control, certainty, predictability in an uncertain world, and, in attempting to forestall chance and change, it is frequently a violent practice. [Security] is about maintaining certain collective identities, certain senses of who we are, of who we intend to remain, more than who we intend to become. Security provides narratives of danger as the stimulant to collective action.⁶⁵

Security and the socio-political processes involved with the implementation of security are extremely complex. The discourse of security helps justify action by the state and serves to solidify the body of the nation. Mark Neocleous demonstrates that the discourse of security is founded on the imagination of not just security, but insecurity as well.⁶⁶ This is mainly projected at the perceived threat from the outside Other. The promise of security is that a utopian society safe from all threats can be obtained; however, the reality is much different. In order for the security discourse to remain salient, insecurity, disorder, and conflict must be present.

The post-9/11 era has seen the conflict in Xinjiang jump scale from the local/national to the international, attaching it to the global discourse of the war on terror.⁶⁷ The new discourse on terrorism radically changed the sociopolitical reality in Xinjiang. Following 9/11, the Chinese state pushed the United States to include Uyghur separatist organisations on the Central Intelligence Agency's list of terrorist organisations. Consequently, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement was internationally recognised as a terrorist organisation, which linked Uyghur separatism to the global war on terror.⁶⁸ Once this connection was made, social control in Xinjiang, often targeting Uyghur individuals and organisations, were repackaged as important

counter-terrorism measures in line with the actions of the United States and its allies.

The three evils terminology can be found in many *Xinhua* and *China Daily* news reports describing Xinjiang, often in the titles of the articles. Some of the headlines are as follows: “China urges int’l community for united stance on terrorism”⁶⁹ and “Expert: Xinjiang riot an act of terrorism”.⁷⁰ This terminology is also repeated several times within the text of multiple articles:

It was a violent crime which was instigated and directed by separatist forces abroad.⁷¹

Qin [Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang] said the Chinese government had evidence that the people suspected of inciting the riot had received training from terrorist organizations abroad.⁷²

Like terrorists elsewhere, those who orchestrated the catastrophe have vicious intentions: That is to create turmoil, and spread fear and hatred.⁷³

While there are cases of violence perpetrated by individuals that have the trappings of terrorism, such as targeted bombings, the majority of the people who identify as Uyghur or support Uyghur autonomy are not terrorists. A *New York Times* Op-Ed contributor highlights this point:

Although there is no dispute that clandestine Uighur groups have from time to time carried out violent attacks – most recently in a series of bombings and attacks on Chinese soldiers just before the Olympic Games – the massive propaganda offensive about the threat of “East Turkestan” terrorism drove Chinese public opinion toward an even more negative perception of the Uighur people, who in turn felt increasingly ostracized and discriminated against.⁷⁴

The application of the threat of terrorism on a massive scale in the media, even though targeted at a select few, cemented the Uyghur identity category as a threat to the Chinese nation and state.

Müller argues that when discourses of this nature are employed the result is the solidification of what are seen as “geopolitical imaginations”.⁷⁵ The socio-political atmosphere in Xinjiang is not one dominated by terrorists, extremists, or separatists. Xinjiang is full of common people living a more normal life. However, the discourse created the perception from outside of Xinjiang that life in Xinjiang is defined by the common occurrence of terrorist, extremist, or separatist activities. This is the ‘banal terrorism’ identified by Katz.⁷⁶ By claiming terrorism is present, the Chinese state can magnify the security apparatus in Xinjiang, justifying its presence in defence of the

sovereign state against those that would come to harm it. Rather than Western hegemony defining the Oriental, in Xinjiang it is the state-run media and Han actors that seek to de-humanise the Uyghur, creating the perception that the Uyghur identity category is filled with a backward people.⁷⁷

The consequences of this discourse are evident in some of events that took place after the initial riots on 5 July. The continuation of counter-terrorist tactics used by the state further increases this marginal effect on identity, especially when the paramilitary and police forces intensify their visual presence within the landscape.⁷⁸ As with the criminalisation rhetoric, the designation of the Uyghur identity category as terrorist, extremist, and separatist served to create a view that this identity category is socially inferior to that of the Han culture or the Chinese state. Indeed, the tactic of terrorism is only deployed when acceptance by a population is not granted and must be coerced. By describing the event through the language of terrorism, it situates the participants as only being able to pursue their cause through violence and coercion. Grant and Brown claim that this is a process taken by many states – ‘social inferiority’ must be clearly evident to justify certain state programmes and the domination of a particular national and cultural identity over those located at the fringe of society.⁷⁹

Outside Agitators

Related to the discourse on the three evils is the third representational trope that identifies outside agitators as the organisers and instigators of the 5 July riots. The Chinese government has often claimed that the World Uyghur Congress – founded originally to support the Uyghur diasporas and led by Rebiya Kadeer – is to blame for unrest in Xinjiang. This group, similar to the Tibetan diaspora led by the Dalai Lama, regularly comments on repression of Uyghur at the hands of the Chinese government, thus becoming a target for the state. Another group mentioned in the discourse is the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, a shadow organisation that Chinese officials claim seeks to separate Xinjiang from China to recreate an Eastern Turkestan Republic.⁸⁰

Articles found in both *China Daily* and *Xinhua* place blame on these outside agitators. The following are a few of the statements noting outside agitators as those responsible:

Government investigations indicate that Sunday’s unrest was controlled and instigated from abroad.⁸¹

. . . masterminded by Eastern Turkestan separatists from abroad.⁸²

There were riots, called for by overseas-based, small groups campaigning for independence.⁸³

It was the darkest day in the history of the Xinjiang region, when Uygur rioters funded and sparked by forces overseas, brutally slaughtered mostly Han civilians in Urumqi.⁸⁴

By describing the riots as the work of outside agitators and forces abroad, the CCP and the Chinese media attached domestic problems to international issues. This is partially used to connect the riots in Xinjiang to international terrorism making the heavy-handed response on par with the international community's response to terrorist attacks in other localities. However, this connection of blame to individuals and organisations outside of China has deeper roots. The *raison d'être* of the modern sovereign state is built on the idea that a state is completely in control of all that is within its territorial boundaries.⁸⁵ By placing responsibility for the riots outside the borders, the Chinese state establishes its legitimacy by maintaining control, peace, safety, and security within China. It also is in line with China's strong views about states having absolute authority over internal affairs. By placing the blame on outside forces, it simultaneously legitimates the Chinese state while undermining the Uyghur identity category as foreign and therefore illegitimate.

CONCLUSION

Violent protests and riots often garner the attention of the media. As new technologies allow news to quickly travel around the world, the ability to define how a violent event is described is an increasingly powerful position. Narratives about the event, which are the representations of reality filtered through specific lenses by a person or organisation, define not only what happened but why it happened and whose fault it was. Narratives attach symbolic significance to events, reify group identity categories, and create a framework that is used to delineate the boundaries between perceived groups.⁸⁶ As Cloke and Johnson argue:

Difference thus becomes more than something to be exalted: it is a potential basis for conflict – as world history has demonstrated to us so many times. . . . Identity and difference, built on geographical foundations, thus become the bases for power relationships, foment inter-group tension and, potentially, conflict.⁸⁷

The representations of significant events can alter structures or further sediment a particular set of social relations. As Moore states, the fluidity of sociopolitical realities should be seen as the norm, and that change constitutes “the basic order of things”.⁸⁸ Events within this conception of dynamic structures then can serve to redirect the trajectory of society or reproduce

the sociopolitical reality at a specific location. The us-versus-them representation of violence is a particularly effective method of bringing into being and hardening the boundaries between group identity categories. The chaos of a riot symbolises uncivilised and disorderly behaviour that is a threat to the lives of the citizens and the orderly society enforced by the state.

In the narratives of the 5 July riots in Xinjiang, the representational tropes that defined the roles of the Uyghur, the Han, and the Chinese state took on particular forms. The discursive framing of the event through the war on terror rhetoric hardened the divisions between particular group identity categories. In the aftermath of the riot, the Uyghur were linked to criminality, the three evils of separatism, extremism, and terrorism, and the threat of outside agitators pursuing objectives with foreign origins that were subversive to the Chinese state. These representational tropes constructed the image of the enemy Other as well as a simple shorthand to understand the complex and chaotic event. The ambiguities of what actually occurred were repackaged into a narrative of order, civilised behaviour, and justice on the one hand, and violence, barbarity, and anti-state activities on the other. *China Daily* and *Xinhua* employed these particular discourses with the impact of creating a division between Uyghur and the Han and the Chinese state, as the Uyghur were represented as outside the norms of the state, standing in contrast to the civilised Han and the Chinese state that guarantees justice and security.

Chinese civilisation is based on the notion of a superior Chinese culture that is practised in all of its territory. The incorporation of minorities into the Chinese state relies on the idea that these groups can maintain their own practices as long as they also respect the preeminence of Chinese culture in China. Consequently, because the possibility that citizens of China would challenge this is inconceivable in the state narrative, the riots had to be attributed to individuals and organisations outside the state. Criminals do not respect state laws, terrorists use violence as a last resort because they cannot convince people to support their position otherwise, and outside agitators are, by definition, not members of the Chinese state. These three representation tropes simultaneously situate the rioters as outside Chinese society and perpetuate the claim of the superiority of Chinese culture and civilisation.

The creation of an us-versus-them narrative and the vilification of the Other also reproduce the conflict and the violence, especially as the state used heavy-handed means to put down the riots and protests. Just as the Han majority remembers the riots as an example of uncivilised criminality, the Uyghur minority remember it as another instance that made explicit their repressed position in the Chinese State. This is more evident today than ever before, especially in respect to the global war on terror which has cemented the use of terrorist rhetoric in defining internal Chinese politics in Xinjiang and to justify actions by the Chinese government against terrorism-like action

within its borders. Additional research is required to adequately address the impact of the riots on Uyghur identity formation and re-formation in the years after the event or to understand the sticking power of 5 July on relations in Xinjiang. However, the implication is that the conflict will continue, whether linearly or in a cyclical manner, as the discourse of security retains its place as an integral part of how the modern state defends the idea of civilisation through violence.

NOTES

1. The category 'Uyghur' can be spelled in many different ways including 'Uygur' and 'Uighur.' This article uses 'Uyghur' because it is the most phonetically accurate spelling.

2. It can be assumed that the protestors saw the 'Han' as responsible for the deaths in Guangdong.

3. These are official numbers of deaths and injuries as reported by *China Daily*, most recently in March 2010.

4. Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for helping us to clarify this argument.

5. There is a large literature in the field of critical geopolitics that analyses the narrative representation of claims of belonging in a particular place. Examples include: M. Coleman, 'The Naming of 'Terrorists' and Evil 'Outlaws': Geopolitical Placemaking after 11 September', *Geopolitics* 8/3 (2003) pp. 87–104; K. Dodds, 'Political Geography III: Critical Geopolitics after 10 Years', *Progress in Human Geography* 25/3 (2001) pp. 469–484; G. Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1996).

6. Andrew Foxall analyses the connections between events, politics, and place in his recent analysis of the 2007 Stavropol riots in Russia; A. Foxhall, 'Discourse of Demonization: Chechens, Russians, and the Stavropol Riots of 2007', *Geopolitics* 15 (2010) pp. 684–704.

7. G. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press 2010) p. 4.

8. The purpose of this article is to identify how narrative impacts the interpretation of politics in Xinjiang via the international perspective. While local and national consumption of these narratives are also important, especially for Chinese nation-building, this is beyond the scope of the article.

9. S. Dalby, 'Imperialism, Domination, Culture: The Continued Relevance of Critical Geopolitics', *Geopolitics* 13/3 (2008) pp. 413–436.

10. Dodds (note 5); Ó Tuathail (note 5).

11. M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Modern Sciences* (New York: Random House 1971); M. Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge 2002).

12. Dalby, 'Imperialism, Domination, Culture' (note 9) p. 414.

13. China and Central Asia have begun to receive more attention in the critical geopolitics literature: M. Labban, 'The Struggle for the Heartland: Hybrid Geopolitics in the Transcaspian', *Geopolitics* 14/1 (2009) pp. 1–25; M. Power and G. Mohan, 'Towards a Critical Geopolitics of China's Engagement with African Development', *Geopolitics* 15 (2010) pp. 462–495; and J. Wilhelmsen and G. Flikke, 'China-Russia Convergence and Central Asia' *Geopolitics* 16/4 (2011) pp. 865–901.

14. N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1992); N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Boston: Addison Wesley 1995); N. Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge 2003).

15. M. Müller, 'Doing Discourse Analysis in Critical Geopolitics', *L'Espace Politique* 12 (2010) pp. 1–18.

16. Altogether, 150 articles were included in the data set, *China Daily* accounted for 106 of the articles, while 44 articles from *Xinhua* were analysed.

17. From *Xinhua's* website, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/special/2011-11/28/c_131274495.htm>.

18. From *China Daily's* website, <<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/static/aboutchinadaily.html>>.

19. R. Brubaker and F. Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity,"' *Theory and Society* 29/1 (2000) pp. 1–47; R. Brubaker, 'Ethnicity without Groups', *European Journal of Sociology* 43/2 (2002) pp. 163–177; R. Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2004); R. Kaiser, 'Homeland Making and the Territorialization of National Identity', in D. Conversi (ed.), *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World: Walker Connor and the Study of Nationalism* (New York: Routledge 2002) pp. 229–247.
20. D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 2004); R. Jones, 'Geopolitical Boundary Narratives, the Global War on Terror and Border Fencing in India', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34/3 (2009) pp. 290–304.
21. R. Mansbach and E. Rhodes, 'The National State and Identity Politics: State Institutionalisation and "Markers" of National Identity', *Geopolitics* 12 (2007) p. 427.
22. M. Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell 2010) p. xxxii.
23. D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge 1991).
24. M. Somers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach', *Theory and Society* 23/5 (1994) p. 606.
25. A. Moore, 'Rethinking Scale as a Geographical Category: From Analysis to Practice', *Progress in Human Geography* 32/2 (2008) p. 218.
26. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso 1991); S. Jones and D. Clarke, 'Waging Terror: The Geopolitics of the Real', *Political Geography* 25 (2006) pp. 298–314.
27. T. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press 2002) p. 105.
28. Brubaker, 'Ethnicity without Groups' (note 19) p. 173, emphasis in original.
29. C. Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries, & Social Ties* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers 2005) p. 59.
30. Brubaker, 'Ethnicity without Groups' (note 19) p. 174.
31. N. Fairclough, '"Political Correctness": The Politics of Culture and Language', *Discourse & Society* 14/2 (2003) pp. 17–28.
32. G. Ó Tuathail and J. Agnew, 'Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy', *Political Geography* 11 (1992) p. 192.
33. M. Müller, 'Reconsidering the Concept of Discourse for the Field of Critical Geopolitics: Towards Discourse as Language and Practice', *Political Geography* 27 (2008) p. 322, emphasis in original.
34. *Ibid.* p. 323.
35. A. Moore, 'The Eventfulness of Social Reproduction', *Sociological Theory* 29/4 (2011) pp. 294–314.
36. M. Sahlins, 'The Return of the Event, Again; with Reflections on the Beginnings of the Great Fijian War of 1843 to 1855 between the Kingdoms of Bay and Rewa', in A. Biersack (ed.), *Clio in Oceania: Toward a Historical Anthropology* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press 1991) pp. 37–100.
37. Moore (note 35).
38. D. Gregory and A. Pred, *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence* (New York: Routledge 2007).
39. R. Pain, 'Place, Social Relations and the Fear of Crime: A Review', *Progress in Human Geography* 24/3 (2000) pp. 365–387.
40. Sahlins (note 36); D. della Porta, 'Eventful Protest, Global Conflicts', paper presented at Conference of the Nordic Sociological Association, Aarhus, Denmark, Aug. 2008, available at <http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/cas_sites/sociology/pdf/EventfulProtest.pdf>.
41. Moore (note 35) p. 297.
42. C. Tilly, 'Describing, Measuring, and Explaining Struggle', *Qualitative Sociology* 31 (2008) pp. 1–13.
43. P. Gossman, *Riots and Victims* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1999) p. 2; Foxall (note 6).
44. Of course, it can also undermine the support of the in-group if it is perceived that it went too far or was unjust.
45. C. Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 2003).
46. A. Bhattacharya, 'Conceptualising Uyghur Separatism in Chinese Nationalism', *Strategic Analysis* 27/3 (2003) pp. 357–381.
47. Bovingdon (note 7); B. Kaltman, *Under the Heel of the Dragon* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press 2007); R. Kadeer, *Dragon Fighter: One Woman's Epic Struggle for Peace with China* (Carlsbad, CA: Kales Press 2009); M. Dillon, *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Far Northwest* (New York: Routledge Cruzon 2004).

48. J. J. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism along China's Silk Road* (New York: Columbia University Press 1997).
49. The concept of small nationalities is similar to those found in Stalin's Soviet project and is based on the idea that these subnational groups should shirk the trappings of ethnic- or tribal-based identities in order to take upon them a broader national or international identity.
50. A. Howell and C. Fan, 'Migration and Inequality in Xinjiang', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 52 (2011) pp. 119–139; C. Pannell, 'China Gazes West: Xinjiang's Growing Rendezvous with Central Asia', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 52 (2011) pp. 105–118.
51. Kadeer (note 47); Dillon (note 47).
52. Howell and Fan (note 50).
53. Kaltman (note 47).
54. B. Hierman, 'The Pacification of Xinjiang: Uighur Protest and the Chinese State, 1988–2002', *Problems of Post-Communism* 54/3 (2007) pp. 49–50.
55. See the 6 July report in *Xinhua* entitled 'Eyewitness Accounts of Xinjiang Riot', available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/06/content_11663760.htm>.
56. See the 7 July report in *China Daily* entitled 'Xinjiang to Adopt Curfew in Capital City Tonight', available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/07/content_8389466.htm>. See also the 7 July report entitled 'Fresh Chaos Erupts in Urumqi', available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/07/content_8389306.htm>; 8 July report entitled 'Measures to Curb Violence Increased in Urumqi', available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/08/content_8390240.htm>.
57. W. Van Schendel and I. Abraham, *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2005).
58. See the 6 July report in *Xinhua* entitled 'Civilians and Armed Police Officer Killed in NW China Violence', available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/06/content_11658819.htm>.
59. See the 6 July report in *Xinhua* entitled 'Commentary: Riot a catastrophe for Xinjiang', available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/06/content_11662490.htm>.
60. See the 19 July report in *Xinhua* entitled 'Official Says 12 Mobsters in Riot Shot Dead, Xinjiang Confident of Revival', available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/19/content_11730463.htm>.
61. See the 9 July report in *China Daily* entitled 'Chinese Minister Urges Hard-Line Crackdown on Thugs in Xinjiang Riot', available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/video/2009-07/09/content_8403134.htm>.
62. See the 7 July report in *Xinhua* entitled 'Chinese Police Chief Urges Tough Crackdown on Gangsters', available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/10/content_11682726.htm>.
63. S. Elden, *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2009).
64. Müller (note 33).
65. S. Dalby, *Environmental Security* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2002) pp. 163–164.
66. M. Neocleous, *Critique of Security* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2008).
67. M. Clarke, 'China, Xinjiang and the Internationalization of the Uyghur Issue', *Global Change, Peace & Security* 22/2 (2010) pp. 213–229.
68. Dillon (note 47); A. Dwyer, *The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse* (Washington: East-West Center Washington 2005); Kaltman (note 47).
69. See the 7 July report in *Xinhua* entitled 'China Urges Int'l Community for United Stance on Terrorism', available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/09/content_11681364.htm>.
70. See the 9 July report in *China Daily* entitled 'Expert: Xinjiang Riot an Act of Terrorism', available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/09/content_8403447.htm>.
71. See the 8 July report in *China Daily* entitled 'Islamic Leader Calls Riot a "Crime"', available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2009-07/08/content_8390295.htm>.
72. See the 9 July report in *Xinhua* entitled 'China Urges Int'l Community for United Stance on Terrorism', available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/09/content_11681364.htm>.
73. See the 8 July report in *Xinhua* entitled 'Riot Shall Not Stop Xinjiang's Developing Steps', available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/08/content_11675834.htm>.
74. N. Bequelin, 'Behind the Violence in Xinjiang', *International Herald Tribune*, 10 July 2009, p. 6.
75. Müller (note 33).

76. C. Katz, 'Banal Terrorism', in D. Gregory and A. Pred (eds.), *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence* (New York: Routledge 2007) pp. 349–362.
77. E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books 1979).
78. D. Roy, 'China and the War on Terrorism', *Orbis* (Summer 2002) p. 517.
79. P. Grant and R. Brown, 'From Ethnocentrism to Collective Protest: Responses to Relative Deprivation and Threats to Social Identity', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58/3 (1995) pp. 195–212.
80. Xinjiang has been part of the Chinese state since the latter part of the eighteenth century, becoming an official province in 1884. Xinjiang briefly claimed independence as the East Turkestan Republic in the 1940s; however, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reaffirmed Chinese control after gaining power and creating the Peoples' Republic of China in 1949.
81. See the 6 July report in *China Daily* entitled 'Death Toll in Xinjiang Riot Rises to 140', available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/06/content_8384017.htm>.
82. See the 6 July report in *China Daily* entitled 'Commentary: Riot a Catastrophe for Xinjiang', available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/06/content_8384676.htm>.
83. See the 7 July report in *China Daily* entitled 'Say No to Riots', available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2009-07/07/content_8386352.htm>.
84. See the 15 July report in *China Daily* entitled "Only Respect Will Restore Trust Rioters Destroyed", available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/usa/2009-07/15/content_11015080.htm>.
85. Castells (note 22); C. Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997).
86. Jones and Clarke (note 26).
87. P. Cloke and R. Johnston, *Spaces of Geographical Thought* (London: Sage Publications 2005) p. 3.
88. Moore (note 35) p. 298.