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# **Old *Counter-Revolution*, New *Terrorism*: Historicizing the Framing of Violence in Xinjiang by the Chinese State**

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## **Abstract**

China has declared a war on terrorism in Xinjiang, identifying violence in the region as a top security threat. However, what nowadays is officially constructed as terrorism used to be framed as counter-revolution in the past. Informed by the concept of *macrosecuritization* and the agenda of critical terrorism studies (CTS), this article examines the changing nature of the Chinese state framing of violence in Xinjiang. Through a comparative analysis of the discursive construction of the Baren (1990) and Bachu (2013) violent incidents, I find that the terror lexicon has replaced old narratives of counter-revolution only to legitimize a sustained crackdown under a novel geopolitical context. The construction of violence in Xinjiang as terrorism, I argue, is contingent, limited, and unstable. It marginalizes factors other than an extremist or separatist agency in the incubation of the violence, in particular the frictions created by the crackdown with which the Chinese government is trying to placate the unrest.

## **Keywords**

China; Xinjiang; terrorism; securitization; Uyghur

## **Introduction**

There was a time when there was no terrorism in Xinjiang, not because there was no socio-political violence in the region, but because the label was absent in the Chinese state's construction of the phenomenon. When violence rocked the Baren township in 1990, the Chinese state media described the events as a 'counter-revolutionary rebellion' (BBCMSAP 1990a). When riots erupted in Ghulja in 1997, Chinese officials framed them as 'a practice of beating, smashing, and looting' pursuing separatism (AFP 1997b). Official depictions changed after the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (9/11) attacks in New York, when the language of terrorism became the dominant vernacular in Chinese security narratives about Xinjiang. This included the retrospective recasting (Tilly 2002) of past violent events. An official report published in 2002 re-articulated the Baren and Ghulja incidents as the work of 'terrorist organizations' (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC 2002). The linguistic shift in the government's framing of violence in Xinjiang illustrates the franchising of the 'Global War on Terror' (GWOt) to countries other than the US, Afghanistan or Iraq, original spheres of the conflict. From Chechnya to the Philippines, the 'war on terror' discourse has been imported by governments to legitimize their responses to domestic insurgencies or dissidences with a history which long predates 9/11 (Russell 2005; Santos 2010). This seminal episode also catalyzed a growing academic interest in the political implications of discursive constructions of terrorism threats, particularly the GWOt and its ramifications (Silberstein 2004; Jackson 2005).

Drawing on conceptual insights from securitization theory and the agenda of critical terrorism studies, this article contributes to this literature by investigating the social construction of violent events by the Chinese state from a historical perspective. In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), long-standing frictions between the Chinese government and the Uyghur ethnic minority have resulted in periodical violent outbursts. In the past decade, these have ranged from clashes between protesters and the Chinese security forces to indiscriminate attacks against civilians. I argue that the contemporary Chinese state discourse constructing these events as terrorism is historically contingent and oversimplifies the causes of the violence. As the article shows, a language of terrorism has replaced the representation of violence as counter-revolution. This is window-dressing the government's past framing of violent events to uphold a state of emergency in Xinjiang within a new geopolitical context. The change of language is not simply the result of altered violent patterns in the region but rather a reflection of a change in what legitimation claims for the use of force by governments domestically are accepted at the international level. The article also demonstrates that the discourse of terrorism in Xinjiang is open to contestation. Chinese state accounts of violence in the region have been challenged by alternative interpretations (Poch 2007; Grammaticas 2013; Haas 2015). As I highlight, these counter-narratives undermine the government's attempts to justify crackdown policies by attaching the terrorism label to violence.

The article proceeds in four sections. First, it overviews the discursive turn in the study of security and terrorism, underscoring the capacity of narratives to justify political responses. The second section contextualizes the post-9/11 contagion of the language of terrorism into the Chinese state's construction of violence in Xinjiang.

Next, the article examines the official narratives interpreting and representing the Baren ‘counter-revolutionary rebellion’ (1990) and the Bachu ‘terrorist’ attack (2013). Finally, I conduct a comparative analysis of these narratives, and reflect on the productive nature of the Chinese state discourse and the political consequences it has for Xinjiang and the Uyghurs.

### **The Study of Terrorism as Discourse**

The study of how security threats, including terrorism, are constructed and used by political actors to advance their agendas has been greatly influenced by empirical developments. In the case of security studies, the Cold War, and in particular the inability of analytical frameworks based in the ‘study of the threat, use, and control of military force’ (Walt 1991, 212) to predict its end, facilitated an evolution of the field into new directions (see Buzan and Hansen 2009). In this context, some scholars shifted the focus from the strategic analysis of the material capabilities of the state, to the linguistic turn of Western philosophy for the study of security (Mutlu and Salter 2013); with an interest in investigating how political discourses construct ‘social realities’ (Milliken 1999: 229-230), amongst them security threats and terrorism. Here, the work of the Copenhagen School is a case in point for understanding how governments avid to legitimize their domestic policies in front of international audiences have imported the GWoT discourse. Buzan and Wæver (2003, 491) defined securitization as the process through which a state actor can transform an issue into a security threat to ‘enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures’ to deal with it. In their further exploration of the concept, they found that some threats are constructed on such ‘universalist’ grounds, as threatening referent objects as wide as the whole of

the humankind, that they create a global conflict within which other micro-conflicts can be framed (Buzan and Wæver 2009). An example of this process, named *macrosecuritization*, took place during the Cold War when Latin American conflicts that had nothing to do with communism were re-phrased as part of the US-Soviet tensions (Buzan and Wæver 2009, 253). The GWoT discourse has emerged as another *macrosecuritization* paradigm within which actors other than the US, including China, have used the international threat of terrorism to re-frame localized conflicts not formerly represented as such.

Meanwhile, the 9/11 events catalysed a turning point in the study of terrorism. In this case, scholars concerned with the analytical and methodological shortcomings of the field (see Stampnitzky 2001; Schmid and Jongman 1988; Silke 2001), made evident with the post-9/11 explosion of literature on terrorism (see Shivani 2007; Boyle 2012) have advanced a focus on the study of terrorism as discourse (Breen Smyth 2007; Jarvis 2009). Concerns with the productive power of the language of terrorism are not a new post-9/11 phenomenon. Chomsky (1987, 190) had examined the biased nature of the American discourse of terrorism, in which only attacks by Arabs were represented as the ‘evil scourge of terrorism’. Meanwhile, Zulaika and Douglas (1996, 4) had questioned the ‘absolutist framework within which terrorism discourse casts its characters and networks’. The discursive approach to the study of terrorism gained momentum after the launching of the GWoT, as the political power of the label was noticed in political and academic circles (Schmid 2004: 397; UN 2002, 6). From a critical perspective, scholars have explored how the language used to construct the GWoT enabled the international military campaign (Silberstein 2004; Jackson 2005). The more consistent effort to validate this approach has come from an

emerging agenda of critical terrorism studies sensitive to the status of terrorism as ‘one of the most powerful signifiers in contemporary discourse’ (Breen Smyth et al. 2008, 1). From this vantage, scholars have promoted the study of the social construction of ‘an issue, individual, states, regions, races and ethnicities, religion, etc. as terrorist’ (Dixit and Stump 2013: 23), or the use of the language of terrorism, to discredit the domestic opposition and legitimize counter-terrorist policies (Gunning 2007, 377; Jarvis 2009, 19).

Approaches to terrorism as discourse are based on four major tenets guiding this study. First, terrorism is understood as a social construction. As Turk (2004, 271) puts it, terrorism is ‘not a given in the real world, but an interpretation of events and their presumed causes’. In other words, there is nothing physically intrinsic about acts of terrorism; it is only through narratives that certain meanings are attached to brute violence (see Milliken 1999). The second tenet is that the language of terrorism has productive power. Discourses are instrumental and conducive to specific political outcomes. As Yee (1996, 95-6) explains, they supply ‘policy makers with meaning of their political situations’, and ‘authorize or restrict, as well as prioritize and distribute, the ideas and beliefs that policymakers can think’. As Turk (2004, 272) suggests, ‘there are political, economic and military implications’ in ‘naming particular entities as terrorists’. A third tenet is that discourses are historically contingent. They are a product of their time, articulated according to specific socio-political structures, so they change with evolving socio-historical contexts (Milliken 1999). Finally, and despite their apparent hegemonic nature, dominant discourses are always open to destabilization and contestation (Jackson 2005). These four elements can be found in relation to the social construction of violence in Xinjiang by the Chinese state.

## **The Franchising of the ‘War on Terror’ Discourse into China**

One of the themes explored in the literature analyzing the GWoT discourse is the contagion of its language and beliefs into settings other than the American military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Noticing the political ramifications of this transmission, Jackson (2005, 13) suggested that some countries had ‘adopted the language of the War on Terror to describe their fight against internal insurgencies and dissidents’. This, as Fierke (2005, 56) pointed out, equalled to ‘subsuming a range of more localized conflicts, with their own distinct histories, and histories of grievance’. To Bhatia (2005, 13), there was an ‘interest of some quasi-authoritarian governments to over-emphasise the militant Islamist character of their opposition, in the hope of US assistance or a *carte blanche* for repression’. Bhatia cited the cases of Uzbekistan, Egypt and Algeria as locations for the franchising of the GWoT. The list of countries is longer. In Morocco, the government has linked moderate Islamist groups and the Western Sahara independence movement to a global terrorist threat, so as to legitimize a crackdown (Bartolucci 2010). Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government used the terror label to undermine the Tamil self-determination project in the international arena, jeopardizing a peaceful solution to the conflict (Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah 2005). In Russia, the conflation of Chechen aspirations to independence with Islamic terrorism by the Putin administrations eclipses the historical complexity of the region (Russell 2005). In the Philippines, the application of the ‘war on terrorism’ lens to the conflict of Mindanao disregards the ethno-nationalist and territorial dimensions of the Moro rebellion, promoting a military solution that ignores social, political, and economic factors (Tan 2003; Santos 2010).



The political tremors of 9/11 were immediately felt in China. Following the attacks in New York, Chinese officials re-framed Uyghur unrest in Xinjiang as a terrorist threat similar to that faced by the US. In a conversation with US president George W. Bush, China's president Jiang Zemin described 9/11 as 'not only a disaster to the US people but also a challenge to the world' (MacAskill, Traynor, and Gittings 2001). Meanwhile, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi claimed that the activities of 'Eastern Turkistan elements', in reference to dissidents in Xinjiang, were a 'global scourge', and added that fighting the 'Eastern Turkistan terrorist forces' should become 'a part of the international efforts' against terrorism (AFP 2001b). Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan repeated these arguments in international forums. In the 2001 annual debate of the UN General Assembly, he emphasized that 'the fight against the East Turkestan group' was 'an important aspect of the international fight against terrorism' (AFP 2001a). During the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum summit, he maintained that Uyghur separatists had been trained in an Afghan camp established by Bin Laden (BBCMAPP 2001b). In front of the UN Security Council (UNSC), he argued, in reference to Xinjiang, that 'terrorism' was 'the common enemy of all mankind' (BBCMAPP 2001a). These efforts were legitimized in some international quarters. In 2002, the US and the UNSC included the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a little known organization that China claimed was part of the 'Eastern Turkistan terrorist forces', on their lists of terrorist organizations (AI 2002).

To be exact, the use of the terror lexicon was not entirely alien to the Chinese discourse on violence in Xinjiang before 2001. The adoption of the 'war on terror'

discourse overtook the previous construction of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism as major threats in Central Asia. This process started in 1996 when the Shanghai Five - embryo of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) formed by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan - signed a treaty aimed at 'strengthening trust and disarmament' in their borders, confirming years of Chinese rapprochement to the region (Clarke 2003). After the signing, the Chinese authorities started to introduce the vocabulary of terrorism into their narratives about Xinjiang. In 1996, Xinjiang governor Abulahat Abdurixit blamed 'ethnic separatists and illegal religious activities' for 'a number of violent terrorist cases' (BBCMSAP 1996b). In 1997, the government revised the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China (1979) and the category of 'crimes of counter-revolution' was reframed as 'crimes of endangering state security', which included those 'in the nature of terrorist activities' (AFP 1997a). In 2001, weeks before 9/11, the SCO signed a convention to 'combat terrorism, separatism and extremism' (SCO 2001). This threat would be later conceptualized as the 'three evil forces' (Xinhua 2004), a rhetorical device by which the Chinese state equates and conflates as a single threat the use of violent means, a separatist agenda, and so-called 'extremist' religious practices. Nevertheless, the threat of terrorism remained a secondary issue for the Chinese authorities: a white paper on defence published in 1998 did not mention terrorism at all, and the 2000 edition did so only in passing (Scobell 2005, 306).

The GWoT had a unique amplifying effect on the Chinese state's construction of terrorism in Xinjiang. This took place in four interrelated ways. First, the government moved from a selective use of the 'terror' jargon before 9/11 to its blanket deployment to describe almost all instances of violence. As an example, the

Ghulja incident in 1997 was not represented as terrorism by Chinese officials, but described as a case of ‘beating, looting and destruction’ by protesters ‘trying to overthrow the political power of the people’ (AFP 1997b). Yet the Urumqi ethnic riots in 2009, an episode of similar nature in as much both began as non-violent protests (see Smith 2011), was blamed on ‘terrorist’ forces (Xinhua 2009). Second, the Chinese authorities opened up about the unrest in the region. In a new context of *macrosecuritization* of Islamic terrorism, China abandoned its reticence to publicize violence in Xinjiang, as illustrated in the official report ‘East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity’ (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC 2002). The beginning of the document echoed the ‘universalist’ rhetoric of the GWoT: ‘Terrorism is a big public hazard in the world today, posing an enormous threat to the peace, security and order of the international community’. The report disclosed a series of violent events that had occurred in Xinjiang since 1990, most of them previously unreported. Notably, and this points to a third element of embracement of the GWoT, the Chinese government recreated past incidents of violence as cases of terrorism. An instance of this retrospective recasting (Tilly 2002, 9) was the Baren incident (1990), represented as a ‘counter-revolutionary rebellion’ in 1990, and described as a ‘terrorist’ incident in 2002. Finally, the Chinese government made the case that its domestic threat of terrorism had to be equated with the global one, accusing those who refused to describe violence in Xinjiang as terrorism of having ‘double standards’ (AFP 2001b).

### **Constructing Violence in Xinjiang: The Cases of Baren (1990) and Bachu (2013)**

In the past, the Chinese state did not frame violence in Xinjiang as terrorism, even when events reflected dominant understandings of terrorism as politically motivated violence against civilians (see Weinberg, Pedahzur and Hirsch-Hoefler 2004). In 1992, an organization identified as the Islamic Reformers Party blew up two buses in the Urumqi, killing three people and injuring 23 (Reuters 1992). When a Chinese court announced the sentences for the crime, the attackers were described as ‘Islamic counter-revolutionaries’ (BBCMSAP 1995). In the GWoT context, violent instances of all types, purposes and dynamics are systematically represented as terrorism by the Chinese government.

This section digs further into this contrast by exploring how two violent incidents were represented in the statements of government officials and the Chinese state media before and after 9/11. Violent events are useful empirical realms through which to test the deployment of security narratives by political agents. As ‘catalytic events’, they provide state actors with the potential to link previously constructed ‘unspecified threats’ to ‘clearly identifiable’ agents (Homolar 2011, 2014, 3-6). The respective threats of counter-revolution and terrorism, of which Chinese leaders had warned weeks before both incidents (The Straits Times 1990a; Xinhua 2013e), would have remained undefined had the Chinese authorities not specifically constructed these events as a ‘counter-revolutionary rebellion’ and a ‘terrorist’ attack. In doing so, they deployed their dominant security repertoire at the time of the events.

***Baren (1990): Constructing Counter-revolution***

While violent uprisings by Muslim populations are not unknown in the history of Xinjiang (see Forbes 1986), the Baren incident has a unique relevance for it raised the profile of Xinjiang in China's national security agenda (Becquelin 2000; Millward 2007). Violence erupted in this township of Kashgar prefecture in April 1990 amid a sensitive context for Beijing. Domestically, China had just witnessed riots in Tibet and the repression of pro-democracy protests at Tian'anmen Square, officially represented as a 'counter-revolutionary rebellion' (BBCMSAP 1989a). At the international level, the dissolution of the Soviet Union troubled the Chinese leadership because Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz peoples, linguistically and culturally close to the Uyghurs, were on the verge of declaring their own state (Smith 2000; Mackerras 2001). In Xinjiang, a variety of factors ranging from increased Han migration and unpopular family planning measures to a religious revival had boosted separatist sentiments amongst Uyghurs (McMillen 1984; Millward 2007). In February 1990, Ismail Amat, Secretary of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, accused 'separatists' of conducting 'activities under ethnic or religious disguise', warning of a 'brutal' response to unrest (Long 1990a). A month earlier, Wang Enmao, former Xinjiang leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), had ordered measures to prevent a 'counter-revolutionary rebellion' in the region (The Straits Times 1990a). When violence flared in Baren, the Chinese authorities were quick to describe the events as a 'counter-revolutionary rebellion' (BBCMSAP 1990a), making Wang's warning a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The PRC narrative on Baren holds that the incident was a premeditated armed uprising. According to the state media, a 'counter-revolutionary organization' had run an extortion campaign to raise funds and recruit people for an anti-state revolt. When

their plot was exposed, the group acted on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1990, during a Muslim festival, forcing ‘ill-informed masses to make trouble’ (BBCMSAP 1990a). Local officials tried to reassure the protestors, who chanted extremist religious slogans, but were met with violence (Dinmore 1990; Reuters 1990a). According to a Xinjiang television broadcast, rioters ‘attacked the public security personnel who went to perform their duty, robbed them of their weapons and killed six armed police officers and fighters, injured 13 others and destroyed four police vehicles’ (AP 1990a). The next day, Chinese security forces put down the revolt, killing 15 rioters (Reuters 1990a).

The official narrative gained traction, not just in China, where alternative accounts could and cannot be publicly articulated given the lack of freedom of expression, but also internationally. Millward (2007, 325) emphasizes that the incident helped to ‘sound Chinese alarms and perk up journalistic ears regarding Islam-inspired separatism’ in Xinjiang. Some Western media reported on ‘holy warriors’ brewing a ‘new jihad’ in China, and foreign diplomats suggested that Afghan mujahidin had armed the rioters (Long 1990b). Even actors that antagonized the Chinese state, such as Uyghur organizations in the diaspora, reproduced and continue to do so the idea of ‘freedom fighters’ uprising against China (ETIB 1991, 1992; WUC 2016). In 2014, a militant group in Syria, with Uyghurs fighting within its ranks, claimed to be inspired by Zeydin Yusuf, a rebel leader who died in the Baren ‘jihad’ (Islah Haber 2014).

Despite its resonance, the official account is not the only version of the incident. Alternative narratives, based on the testimony of local witnesses and travellers, and reproduced by Western media and international organizations, hold

that the episode started as a peaceful demonstration against restrictions on religious activities, which then escalated into a riot repressed by Chinese forces (Kynge 1990; AI 1992). According to this version, several groups of 60 to 200 Uyghurs had assembled in mosques to demand religious freedom the day before the riot. The Chinese authorities tried to persuade them to disperse, but resorted to the use of force on April 5<sup>th</sup>, after a public prayer in front of government offices (AI 1992).

There is political agency in both narratives making sense of the events. Despite their antagonistic nature, both suggest that there was a prelude of negotiation between protesters and Chinese officials, and a final escalation into violence. These were plausible circumstances. Islamic proselytizing from Saudi preachers, which included the distribution of anti-Chinese leaflets, was not unheard of in Xinjiang at the time (AP 1990b; Dreyer 2008). In addition, social outrage was increasing in southern Xinjiang due to official plans to limit the number of mosques and Islamic schools (The Straits Times 1990b). However, the construction of the incident as an uprising by an armed jihadist organization suggests a vested interest in exaggerating the nature and scope of the incident. Particularly questionable is the armed dimension attached to the insurrection, considering that the rebels only had one gun, having seized most of their weapons from the police after clashes started (Millward 2007, 327). At the same time, the construction of the incident as a case of repression of a peaceful protest underplays the potential violent character of some protesters. Violence against the Chinese security forces in the course of demonstrations was not rare. Only a year earlier, hundreds of Muslims protesting a book considered denigrating to Islam stormed government buildings in Urumqi beating policemen and officials (BBCMSAP 1989b). The incident was officially described as a ‘counter-

revolutionary riot' staged by 'hooligans' (BBCMSAP 1989b). Eventually, the official and alternative accounts of Baren merely differ on the what triggered the violence: for the former, this was the lynching of two officials by protesters, while for the latter it was the Chinese authorities resorting to force to quell the demonstration.

Beyond attempting to establish how the events *actually* unfolded, the official discourse gained further political traction by constructing the rioters, their purposes and actions, and the threat they posed, and prescribing the policies to confront them. Here, CCP officials and the Chinese state media articulated four main arguments.

First, they suggested that violence was premeditated by an organization with a dissident political-ideological agenda, and involved some form of cooperation with foreign actors. State media broadcasts attached a separatist and religious motivation to the rioters, who wanted 'to oppose the Chinese Communist Party' (Reuters 1990a) and to establish 'a republic of East Turkestan' (Dinmore 1990). Despite pointing that the incident was 'not caused by either nationality or religious problems' (BBCMSAP 1990a), the official narrative represented the rioters as a 'gang' that 'under the banner of religion, incited a religious craze, and wildly proclaimed the launching of a sacred war to eliminate the heathens' (Dinmore 1990). Chinese officials such as regional chairman Tomur Dawamat also noted the influence of foreign 'separatist forces' in the turmoil (BBCMSAP 1990b).

A second argument was that the incident, far from being isolated, was part of a wider, increasing conflict. The Xinjiang television network presented the riot as part of a 'protracted, complicated and arduous' fight against 'splittism' (BBCMSAP



1990a). Chinese officials also warned of an ever-intensifying conflict. Amudun Niyaz, regional deputy party secretary, pointed out that Baren was not an ‘isolated’ case and warned of a ‘very fierce’ conflict against separatism (Reuters 1990f). Ba Dai, member of the region’s CCP standing committee, noted that ‘hostile forces at home and abroad’ were ‘stepping up their infiltration’ and ‘national separatists’ were ‘intensifying their sabotage’ (Tyson 1990). Meanwhile, the *Xinjiang Daily* commented that ‘backward religious forces’ were ‘continually expanding their battlefields’ (Reuters 1990d).

Next, the culprits were constructed as the most urgent threat to the stability of Xinjiang. A government report produced weeks after the incident described ‘national splittism’ as a top threat to stability (Long 1990c). High-ranked officials echoed this idea. Wang Enmao remarked that separatism was ‘the major danger facing Xinjiang’ (Reuters 1990d). For his part, Qiao Shi, head of the Chinese security forces, declared that the CCP was ‘very concerned about stability in Xinjiang’ (Wo-Lap Lam 1990).

Finally, Chinese officials suggested a two-pronged strategy that addressed both ethnopolitics and religion. Tomur Dawamat called for action against ‘splittist and sabotage activities’ (Reuters 1990e). He also pledged to ‘effectively intensify supervision over religious activities’, and to prohibit the interference of ‘outside forces’ (Reuters 1990g). The Chinese authorities demanded intensity in this campaign (Reuters 1990c). Amudun Niyaz called for using ‘every possible means to supply clues to the government to expose our enemies’ evil plots’ (Reuters 1990f). Meanwhile, Kuerban Rouzi, head of the Xinjiang Peoples’ Court, ordered ‘strong measures’ against those committing the crimes of ‘counter-revolutionary murder, counter-revolutionary sabotage, incitement to armed rebellion, organizing and leading

counter-revolutionary groups and engaging in counter-revolutionary propaganda or incitement' (The Straits Times 1990d). Rouzi's speech encapsulated the relevance of the counter-revolutionary lexicon in the Chinese government's construction of violence at the time.

### ***Bachu 2013: Constructing Terrorism***

Unlike the Baren riot, a unique case at the time, the Bachu incident is part of a wave of violence that erupted in 2008 after almost a decade without significant violent events in Xinjiang. The wave started with an attack against Chinese paramilitary police officers in Kashgar and escalated after the riots in Urumqi in 2009. In 2013 alone, a total of 28 violent episodes were reported in the region, with 34 in 2014, and 18 in 2015<sup>1</sup>. Incidents have included organized attacks against police stations, clashes between the police and military forces and suspected terrorists in the course of counter-terrorism raids, riots resulting from the repression of protests for religious or social grievances, security operations intercepting Uyghurs trying to flee the country, targeted assassinations of religious or government officials, and premeditated indiscriminate attacks against civilians, mostly Han Chinese<sup>2</sup>. Under the GWoT context, China has conceptualized most of these episodes as terrorism, as the Bachu incident illustrates.

As with the Baren incident, there are official and alternative accounts of the events reported in Seriqbuya town, in Bachu (Maralbexi) County of Kashgar prefecture, on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013. The official narrative, echoed by the state media and the Chinese authorities, holds that the unrest occurred when three Chinese community

workers did a regular visit to a Uyghur house. There, they reportedly found ‘suspicious individuals’ watching ‘videos from overseas showing terrorist acts’, in possession of a cache of knives (Yang 2013; Xinhua 2013a). The officers reported the situation to the police by phone while attempting to defuse the tensions, but individuals in the house attacked them (Yang 2013). Policemen sent to investigate the case were ambushed and killed. The attackers then tried to assault the local police station but were faced by a stronger police team, which gunned down seven attackers and arrested eight (China Daily 2013b). A week after the clash, the police disclosed some circumstances predating the event that would underpin the *post-hoc* construction of the violence as a terrorist attack. Accordingly, members of the family living in the house had created a ‘terrorist’ group and were plotting a ‘big’ attack in the future, for which they had prepared ‘long knives’ (China Daily 2013b). The cell, formed in 2012, had undergone ‘terrorist’ training and fundraising activities (China Daily 2013b). The official narrative was contested by alternative accounts reproduced by Western media. These versions, based on local sources, pointed out that the community workers were trying to enforce a ban preventing women from wearing full veils on a family that had had long-standing issues with the authorities over religious restrictions (Grammaticas 2013; RFA 2013c). Violence erupted when a community worker lifted the veil of a woman, a major offence considering the Islamic female modesty code (see Bellér-Hann 1998).

As a catalytic event, the Bachu incident provided a platform for the Chinese state to deploy its terrorism discourse. Government officials and the state media labelled the rioters as ‘terrorists’, and conceptualized the episode as a ‘violent terrorist criminal case’ or a ‘terrorist act’ (Xinhua 2013c; Global Times 2013a.). Some

newspapers reinforced this construction with headlines like ‘recalling pain from day of horror’ or ‘timeline of terror’ (China Daily 2013b; Cui 2013b).

As they weighed up the event, Chinese officials articulated the core arguments of the ‘three evil forces’ discourse (Xinhua 2013d). Firstly, they stated that the incident was a premeditated attack by a separatist and religious extremist organization. In this vein, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying described it as ‘a premeditated attack carried out by a violent terrorist group’ (BBC 2013). Hou Hanmin, spokeswoman for the Xinjiang government, zoomed in the radicalization of the attackers, claiming that they had trained for months, watching videos ‘from overseas’ and making knives ‘to use them for Jihad’ (CNN 2013). Dai Guanghui, head of Kashgar’s public security bureau, also suggested a pre-existing violent agency, revealing the group’s plot to launch a ‘bigger terrorist attack’ in Kashgar (Xinhua 2013b).

Secondly, the incident was conceptualized as an episode in a wider, protracted conflict. Meng Hongwei, Chinese Vice Minister of Public Security, described this conflict as a ‘prolonged and complicated’ anti-terror fight (Xinhua 2013c). Zhang Chunxian, regional party secretary, also predicted a ‘complicated and intense’ fight in the ‘long-term’ (Cui 2013a). After the clash, Hua Chunying warned that ‘terrorist forces’ would keep trying to ‘sabotage Xinjiang’s stability’ (BBC 2013).

Next, Chinese officials stressed that the violence had nothing to do with causes other than terrorism. Hou Hanmin affirmed that it was ‘a terrorist case where 15 people were attacked and slain by violent terrorists’, denying any ‘disturbance or

conflicts like those mentioned by some offshore media' (BBCMAPP 2013). Meanwhile, and despite mentions to the religious radicalization of the attackers, regional governor Nur Bekri affirmed that the incident was 'not about ethnic or religious issues' (China Daily 2013a).

A fourth argument posited that terrorism was an evil threat against humanity and the world now faced by China, as the incident proved. Hou Hanmin described terrorists as 'the common enemies of peace-loving people across the world' (Yang 2013). As such, she added, they 'wouldn't care about victims' ethnicity or nationality, not about whether they were officials or members of the public'. For his part, Meng Hongwei highlighted the 'anti-social' and 'anti-human' nature of the attackers (Xinhua 2013c). Chinese officials also emphasized that terrorism was an international threat shared by China. Hou linked the events in Bachu to recent terrorist plots such as the Boston marathon bombings (Yang 2013). Meanwhile, an op-ed published by the *Global Times* (2013b) presented them as a reminder of the 'still present danger of terrorism around the world'.

Finally, the Chinese government seized the opportunity to prescribe an intense crackdown against terrorism and religious extremism. Meng Hongwei vowed an 'iron-handed crackdown against terrorism', asking the police to 'use every possible means to find and punish terrorists with no mercy' (Xinhua 2013c). In a similar vein, Nur Bekri, advised to 'leave no room for compromises and concessions' for the terrorists (China Daily 2013a). Other officials linked the terror threat with religion. Shi Dagang, deputy governor of Xinjiang, asked for preventing the 'promotion of extreme thought in the name of religion' (Cui 2013c). For his part, Zhang Chunxian

called for stopping ‘the distribution of illegal religious information’ to tackle terror activities (Cui 2013a). These statements legitimized the crackdown approach that currently dominates the Chinese policies in Xinjiang, as the next section explores.

### **The Politics of Counter-Revolution and Terrorism: Different Labels, Increasing Crackdown**

Put into an historical perspective, the flagship label dominating the language used by the Chinese authorities to represent violence in Xinjiang has visibly changed. At the beginning of the 1990s, the counter-revolution lexicon commanded the official narratives. This wording reflected China’s security discourse at the time, epitomized by the Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China (1979), which described as counter-revolutionary crimes those conducts harmful to the state and aimed at ‘overthrowing the proletarian dictatorship and socialist system’ (Wong K. 2010). Amongst these, separatism was the ‘worst epithet’ to be levelled against dissidents in Xinjiang (Callahan 2004). However, the Bachu incident was represented with the language of terrorism, which reflects the post 9/11 franchising of the dominant GWoT discourse into China, replacing a now obsolete counter-revolutionary jargon.

Yet while the language has changed, the main arguments underpinning the official narratives have remained constant over the years. Both episodes were framed as premeditated attacks organized by dissident groups advancing a separatist or religious extremist agenda. In both instances, violence was articulated as exogenously inspired, when not directed, by ‘foreign hostile forces’ or the ‘three evil forces’. Also in both occasions, the Chinese state discourse explicitly marginalized alternative

interpretations of what triggered the violence, notably potential frictions related to social, ethnic, or religious grievances.

Some ideas conveyed by the Chinese official narrative have nevertheless evolved. This is the case for the referent object that, according to the government, was threatened by the violence. While the stability in Xinjiang and the unity of China and its nationalities were presented as values in danger after both incidents, the state narrative in 1990 zoomed in the threat that separatism posed to the CCP's one-party state and its ideological tenets. The state media mentioned the 'people's regime' or 'the construction of civilisation in the spirit of socialism' as objects jeopardized by the unrest (BBCMSAP 1990a; The Straits Times 1990c). Meanwhile, Kuerban Rouzi affirmed that the revolt opposed 'the Communist Party's leadership' and the ideology of 'socialism' (The Straits Times 1990d). In contrast, as the Bachu episode illustrates, terrorism is represented as a threat to humankind, and not as a risk to the socialist orthodoxy or the CCP rule. The legitimization of the crackdown in Xinjiang is thus pursued by framing the region as a front threatened by global terrorism. The Chinese authorities have therefore been very assertive in relating violence in Xinjiang to transnational groups like Al Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS) (Hindustan Times 2007; Cui 2015) or comparing violence in Xinjiang with attacks in other parts of the world (Zhang Y. 2015; Global Times 2017).

Perhaps more significantly, the political response to unrest in Xinjiang advocated by the Chinese state was quite similar in 1990 and 2013. Considering the state of exception conveyed by the official discourse, a crackdown approach emerged as the logical reaction to violence. This crackdown is characterized by strict controls

on the practice of Islam, a core identity marker of the Uyghur ethnic minority. Right after the Baren incident, the Chinese authorities broke up 500 counter-revolutionary gangs and arrested thousands of people in the region (Reuters 1990b). In addition, they tightened the control over Muslim practices, purging the clergy, closing more than 200 unauthorized Islamic schools, and investigating up to 500 religious figures and 12,000 people (Fu 1992; AI 1992). New regulations were issued to control Muslim clerics and restrict religious education and materials to the official channels (AI 1992; AFP 1992). The reaction to the Baren events set the political stage for the following decade. In 1996, the Chinese government issued the *Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Document No. 7*, which described ‘national separatism and illegal religious activity’ as ‘the main threats to the stability’ of Xinjiang (HRW 1998, 10-8). The directive called for tightening the control over religious practices, and encouraged a diplomatic campaign in Central Asia to ‘weaken the activities of separatist forces’ (HRW 1998: 13). What followed domestically was a series of massive crackdown operations named ‘strike hard’ (*yanda*)<sup>3</sup>, which prioritized the ‘serious and swift punishment’ of criminals (Trevaskes 2010, 397; BBCMSAP 1996a). In Xinjiang, they were specifically driven against Uyghur dissidents (Bovingdon 2004, 22; HRW 2005). Thousands were arrested in the region, many of them executed on charges of separatism (Reuters 1996; AI 2001). At the international level, and following *Document No. 7*, China successfully managed to co-opt many Central Asian States (Peuch 2001) and other countries such as Pakistan (AFP 1997c) or Turkey (Shichor 2009) into silencing and weakening the Uyghur diaspora and exiled activists, when not directly extraditing them to China (Reuters 1999).



Meanwhile, the policies applied by China in Xinjiang at the time of the Bachu incident are framed within a ‘people’s war on terrorism’ (Xinhua 2015). At this stage, the Chinese state considers the independent practice of Islam, as well as certain religious symbols, as indicators of extremism and terrorism risk. Amongst them, wearing burkas and niqabs, grooming long beards, wearing ‘terrorist’ clothing, or adopting ‘extremist’ Muslim names (Reuters 2013; Cui 2014b; Zhang X. 2015; RFA 2017). Teaching religion or organising prayers in places not officially designated for that purpose continue to be persecuted practices (Cao 2014; Su 2017). China’s war on terror goes beyond disciplining religion, and also contemplates active secularization policies aimed at assimilating the Uyghur identity within the Han Chinese culture. These include the promotion, when not imposition, of Chinese cultural or patriotic activities among Uyghurs (Hayoun 2013; RFA 2016; Byler 2018), the encouraging or enforcing of Muslims to participate in the tobacco and alcohol sectors as either merchants or consumers (RFA 2015; Reuters 2015), or the award of economic incentives for inter-ethnic marriages or the abandonment of religious symbols (RFA 2014a; Sun 2017). As in the 1990s (see Bovington 2004, 34), the crackdown is particularly concerned with party members and students. Party cadres are punished if they take part in religious activities (BBC 2014; Reuters 2014). Meanwhile, secularization and ideological indoctrination efforts are common in the educational field (Chang and Bai 2014; Global Times 2016).

As a ‘people’s war’, the anti-terrorist drive entails the recruitment of the entire population in Xinjiang. On the one hand, the deployment of security forces and officials monitoring the enforcement of the crackdown has greatly increased (Zenz and Leibold 2017). These officials are punished if they do not show enough anti-

extremist zeal (Gan 2017; Liu 2017). On the other hand, the government offers financial rewards to the population for providing tip-offs on violent plots or religious extremist conducts (China Daily 2013c; Huang 2017). The reach of this ‘hunt’ for terrorists transcends the Chinese borders, with dozens of Uyghurs fleeing China, often in groups of families, having been deported from countries like Cambodia, Vietnam or Thailand accused of seeking to enrol with jihadist groups abroad (Blanchard 2015; Meng 2015; Gerin 2014).

The latest turn in the ‘people’s war on terror’ is an emerging structure of surveillance of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. This includes the strict monitoring of people by confiscating passports, collecting biometric data, deploying CCTV and facial recognition systems, registering personal items, or tracking vehicles (People’s Daily 2010; Global Times 2015; BBC 2016; Li 2017; Bai 2015, Reuters 2016). The Internet is also heavily monitored, with severe punishments for the possession or dissemination of ‘extremist’ contents, the spreading of rumours that jeopardize stability, or the use of ‘terrorist software’ that avoids censorship (Tianshan News 2013; Wen 2013; Wong C. 2014; Lam 2016).

### **Conclusion: The Limits of China’s Construction of Violence in Xinjiang**

This article has put the Chinese state discourse constructing violence in Xinjiang into an historical perspective. As I have demonstrated, the contemporary articulation of violence in the region as terrorism is largely contingent upon the context of the GWoT. In 1990, the Chinese authorities represented the Baren riot as a counterrevolutionary armed rebellion, in line with the dominant security discourse

embodied in China's first Criminal Law of 1979. Under the GWoT paradigm, violent episodes in Xinjiang are systematically constructed by the Chinese state as acts of terrorism with a global dimension, as the Bachu incident illustrates. Over the years, the Chinese state has represented violence in Xinjiang as largely the result of a dissident separatist and religious extremist agency linked to foreign political actors. This framing reproduces an endless state of emergency, and legitimizes a constant security crackdown in the region. The increasingly harsh repression documented in the region since the 1990s is the logical outcome of Chinese leaders vowing a crackdown that 'should reach every village and household' (Global Times 2014), or calling to 'bury the corpses of terrorists and terror gangs in the vast sea of the people's war' (BBC 2017).

Yet the discourse of terrorism in Xinjiang is limited and unstable, as it ignores and marginalizes alternative explanations of what causes the violence. For every official narrative depicting violent episodes in Xinjiang as acts of terrorism inspired by religious extremism or foreign hostile forces, alternative narratives emerge of local grievances triggering the attack, often related to the crackdown in place, as the cases of Baren and Bachu indicate. A caveat here is that there have been a number of cases of violence in Xinjiang that resemble what is generally understood as terrorism in academic and political circles. Horrific episodes such as the attacks in Beijing in 2013, or Urumqi and Kunming in 2014, bear witness to it. These are episodes of premeditated indiscriminate violence against civilians, and portraying them merely as acts of resistance or desperation, ignoring the brutality of the attacks (see Rippa 2013) is a no less limited and biased interpretation than it is to ignore factors others than a political extremist agency of international ascent that lure behind most of the violence

reported in Xinjiang. Emphasizing the brutality of these specific events should not be incompatible with acknowledging that the protracted state of crackdown is a fundamental factor behind violent unrest in Xinjiang. A nuanced analysis of these events that replaces the uncritical discourse of ‘evil’ forces and ‘merciless’ fight may help deactivating the seemingly endless cycle of tension, violence, and repression that all Chinese ethnic groups continue to suffer.

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s account based on monitoring the Chinese state media and unofficial reports from Western media and other organizations such as Radio Free Asia.

<sup>2</sup> Narratives of these types of events can be found, in order of mentioning, in Xinhua 2008; Yanan and Xiaoxun 2009; Oriental Daily 2013; RFA 2013a; RFA 2013b; Boehler 2015; Qiu 2013; RFA 2014b; Xinhua 2014; and Cui 2014a.

<sup>3</sup> Shorthand for *yanli daji yanzhong xingshi fazui* [strike hard at serious crime]. See Trevaskes 2008, 397.

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