

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Privilege and Prejudice: Han Victimhood and Legitimizing Islamophobia in China

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## Abstract

Islamophobia, along with other forms of alt-right discourse and hate speech, is a well-documented phenomenon in the Euro-American world. Despite increasing scholarly attention in the West, however, research on Islamophobia in authoritarian regimes is more limited. Using content analysis of key online Islamophobic accounts, this paper shows that there are two distinct types of Islamophobic narratives in the Chinese cyberspace: a “confessional” narrative attributed to Uyghur authors, and a warning narrative specifically for Han readership, cautioning them about the hidden dangers posed by the Hui. This paper explores how these Islamophobic pieces share a Han-centric gaze where the Han, the majority-dominant group in China today, are placed in both a saviour role in terms of the Uyghurs, and a victim role as underdogs coming under attack from the Hui. The successful assimilation of the Hui has led to suspicion and narratives of betrayal, despite state efforts to promote Hui assimilation as a successful example of ethnic harmony. Whereas the Uyghurs are welcomed and accepted as long as they are willing to admit Han superiority, the Hui are rejected based on their perceived threat to Han dominance.

## 摘要

在当今权威政体中，有关仇视穆斯林现象所表现的叙事形式的研究不多，本文通过对社交媒体中一些对伊斯兰极右言论和仇穆现象的综合分析，发现存在两种不同叙事，一种是描述为维族自我否定和反思的叙事，另一种是视回族为潜在危险，用以警示汉族的叙事。本文就上述不同的叙事框架，深层机制及其所呈现的言论的顺应逻辑进行了探讨。

**Keywords:** Islamophobia; Han; Hui; Uyghur; alt-right; online discourse; narratives; social media

**关键词:** 伊斯兰恐惧症; 仇穆; 极右; 网络舆论; 网络叙事; 社交媒体

Islamophobia, along with other forms of alt-right discourse and hate speech, is a well-documented phenomenon in the Euro-American world. Despite increasing scholarly attention in the West, however, research on Islamophobia in authoritarian regimes is more limited. Although differing in sociopolitical context and narrative substance, it is possible for such discourses to “travel” and be localized in other parts of the world, contributing to the emergence of a global alt-right phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The exploration of how hate-inciting discourses such as Islamophobia are narratively constructed and reproduced in countries such as China is particularly relevant in the world today.

In theory, China guarantees religious freedom and respect for all ethnic groups. Enshrined in the Chinese Constitution of 1982 (Chapter Two, Article 36) is the right to practise any of the five state-sponsored religions, of which Islam is one. However, the dominant Han group’s attitude towards and relationship with Muslims have always been strained. Muslims are seen as familiar strangers<sup>2</sup>

1 Yang and Fang 2023; Thobani 2019.

2 Lipman 2011.

but are not nearly as “approachable” or “trustworthy” as Buddhists.<sup>3</sup> Since the proliferation of the patriotic education campaigns, which were launched in the 1990s, the “us versus them” mentality has become even more prevalent.<sup>4</sup> The cultural racist distrust, a key element often found in Islamophobia elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> is further intertwined with the rise of Han-centrism in recent years, the grand narrative of which posits that only Han culture is the authentic characteristic underpinning the nation and that any deviation from it will impede China’s rise.<sup>6</sup> Some observers have argued that such Han-centric nationalism essentially places China within a Social Darwinian world in which actors seen as the “other” are all potential challengers to the Chinese sphere of influence and must be met with an immediate response.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Islamophobic sentiments in contemporary China are intertwined with a grand narrative that projects that patriotism equals cultural assimilation, secularization and often the rejection of overt religious practices such as consuming halal food.<sup>8</sup>

This paper uses online Islamophobic accounts to show that there are two distinct types of Islamophobic narrative in the Chinese cyberspace: a confessional narrative aimed at Uyghurs and a warning narrative aimed at the Hui. The Hui and Uyghurs are by far the two largest Muslim groups in China, accounting for 48 per cent and 41 per cent of the Chinese Muslim population respectively.<sup>9</sup> In this paper, I will not delineate the history of the Hui and Uyghurs in China or examine their current condition under state policy, as research on those topics is plentiful.<sup>10</sup> I will, however, provide an overview of Han centrism and briefly discuss the privilege enjoyed by the dominant group in order to better contextualize the material that follows. It is worth stressing that while this paper explores the relationship between the Han majority and other ethnic minorities in China, it is not an account of ethnic experiences or indeed a paper about ethnicity in China in general. Instead, the focus is on the phenomenon that is underexplored: the *perceptions* of the relationship between ethnic minorities and the Han majority held by Islamophobic actors who are on the rise in the Chinese cyberspace, and how such perceptions of privilege and victimhood interact with and counteract state narratives on ethnicity in China.

The Hui and Uyghurs are chosen as case study minority groups for this paper because they present a striking contrast for the topic at hand. Whereas the Uyghurs have been securitized as potentially rebellious and dangerous, the Hui have always been portrayed in state narratives as the model minority owing to their successful Sinicization and assimilation. However, this paper will show that grassroots sentiments among the Han majority do not reflect the state narrative in this regard and, in fact, often contradict it. I will explore how online Islamophobic narratives share a Han-centric lens through which the Han Chinese, the majority-dominant group in China today, are seen as both saviour – with regards to the Uyghurs – and victim – as the underdog under attack from the Hui. The successful assimilation of the Hui, instead of promoting ethnic unity, has led to suspicion and narratives of betrayal. Such narratives accept and welcome Uyghurs – as long as the Uyghurs accept Han superiority – yet they reject the Hui based on the Hui’s assimilation and economic and political success.

### Han-Centrism, Han Privilege and Minority Prejudice

Although the People’s Republic of China (PRC) advocates multiculturalism, Chinese ethnic nationalism has a Han-centric dimension<sup>11</sup> which claims that “the Han culture is the world’s most

3 Yi 2007.

4 Friedman 2008.

5 Schiffer and Wagner 2011.

6 Friend and Thayer 2017.

7 Agnew 2012.

8 Miao 2020; Lan and Navera 2021.

9 National Bureau of Statistics 2011.

10 Zang 2015; Smith Finley 2019; Acharya, Gunaratna and Wang 2010.

11 Zhao and Postiglione 2010.

advanced and its race is one of the strongest and most prosperous,” such that “the interests of the Han race are equivalent to the interests of China as a whole and the welfare of its people.”<sup>12</sup> Such Han-centric narratives seem to run counter to the government’s “official” multicultural nationalism, as proclaimed by the 1982 Constitution, which sees the PRC as “a unified multi-ethnic state founded by the Chinese people of all ethnic groups.”<sup>13</sup> Yet the idea that Han culture is related to Chineseness is deeply entrenched in the PRC’s historical and patriotic education,<sup>14</sup> where the image of Han superiority is intertwined with the Marxist ideology of progress, and other ethnicities are urged to follow the example of the Han.<sup>15</sup> By extension, the Chinese nation (*guojia* 国家) is believed to be the home of the Han people and the revival of Han culture is seen as necessary for China’s continued development.<sup>16</sup> Distinguishing the Han from the “other,” ethnic minorities continue to be portrayed as the “backwards periphery” in contrast to the Han’s “progressive, modern core.”<sup>17</sup> Han-ness is an unmarked category against which other *minzu* 民族 (ethnic minority) groups are compared. For example, in the PRC’s textbooks and national stage performances, Han Chinese don Westernized suits and dresses, while ethnic minorities are depicted in distinctive ethnic garb and performing ethnic songs and dances, essentially juxtaposing the “normal” and “modern” Han with the “culturally backward” and “unlearned” minorities.<sup>18</sup>

Han culture is then conflated to mean Chinese culture and thus the Han are seen as the dominant, paradigmatic ethnic group in China.<sup>19</sup> Some cultural conservatives even go so far as to advocate the superiority of Han culture over other, Western cultures.<sup>20</sup> Within this Han-centric narrative, to be Chinese is essentially to be Han and Han culture represents the authentic character of the nation; to pollute or deviate from the Han identity will only tarnish Chinese exceptionalism and impede China’s rise.<sup>21</sup> This almost racialized understanding of ethnicity, together with the understanding that ethnic identity is stable, given and mutually exclusive, has given rise to a “great Han mentality” within China that forms the basis of a deeply rooted discriminatory bias against the non-Han.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the PRC’s many formalized safeguards to protect multiculturalism and ethnic minority identities, cultures and languages,<sup>23</sup> the government continues to exploit the Han-centric sentiment, which is deeply embedded within the population, whenever ethnic minorities challenge government policies, such as the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, or during territorial disputes with other countries in the region.<sup>24</sup> This is particularly pertinent in the context of Muslim populations in China. Their minority status and the Muslim identity are both constituted as the “other” in a Han-centric world-view: just as minorities are construed as backwards and peripheral, Muslims are perceived as suspicious, alien and potentially violent. This is where Han-centric and Anglo-centric world-views collude: fundamentally, both dominant groups see themselves as modern and forward thinking, yet they cast minority, racialized and othered identities as the civilizational antithesis of themselves.

Although some scholars argue that Han privilege, along the lines of white privilege, has yet to emerge in China in the absence of awareness and any protest movement similar to the civil rights

12 Leibold 2010, 69.

13 State Council of the PRC 1982, Preamble.

14 Callahan 2009.

15 Hasmath 2022.

16 Friedman 2008.

17 Fiskesjö 2006.

18 Baranovitch 2010; Gladney 2004.

19 Irgengioro 2018.

20 Chew and Wang 2012.

21 Friend and Thayer 2017.

22 Lin 1997; Joniak-Luthi 2015.

23 McCarthy 2011.

24 Howland 2011.

movements of the West,<sup>25</sup> Han-centrism and Han chauvinism are not new concepts. Research has shown that the nationality policy of the PRC continues to be formulated from a Han-centric perspective.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, privilege does not have to be visible to be entrenched. Just as white supremacy and privilege are built upon the invisibility of whiteness,<sup>27</sup> Han norms permeate society and become value-neutral and the standard against which deviance is measured. The privilege embedded in a dominant group's existence is such that it "often goes unnoticed for those who benefit from it, but, for those who don't, [it is] often blatantly and painfully ubiquitous."<sup>28</sup> It is also important to consider positive and negative forms of privilege. Positive privileges are supposed to be shared with everyone (such as equal access to education) and are more likely to be formalized within state policy; however, it is the negative forms of privilege that need to be identified and addressed, because they allow the dominant group to be dismissive of the disadvantaged others and to be "ignorant, oblivious, and arrogant, often without realizing that that is what they are doing."<sup>29</sup> Such negative forms of privilege are particularly noticeable in China, where Han-dominated discussions on topics such as race and Muslims are awash with casual discriminatory and derogatory terms. As this paper will demonstrate, dismissive and aggressive narratives surrounding minorities are not only about othering the out-group but also about strengthening in-group pride and the dominance of the majority.<sup>30</sup>

## Methods

This paper draws on data gathered from four prominent Islamophobic accounts hosted on the Weibo and WeChat platforms in the Chinese cyberspace. A total of 299 articles, published between 2014 and 2020, on the two main Muslim populations in China, the Hui and the Uyghurs, were collected and analysed using NVivo. The sampled accounts were chosen because they all exhibit a clear Islamophobic stance, with each purporting to deal with "issues with Muslim populations in China." It is important to note that these accounts do not fall under the category of generic far-right profiles that sporadically post Islamophobic content. The primary objective of the data collection and analysis is not to ascertain whether the content of the articles is Islamophobic, but rather to analyse the narratives the authors employ to justify their perspective.

The two Weibo accounts in the sample have been shut down and have then migrated many times; in their current iteration, they have more than 170,000 followers and 176,000 public followers, respectively, as of April 2023.<sup>31</sup> It is not possible to access the visibility data for Wechat public accounts; however, one account holder claimed that he had amassed more than 10,000 followers in a year and routinely had thousands of views per article before his account was banned.<sup>32</sup> While having 10,000 followers at any given time may not seem a significant number, it is worth bearing in mind that these accounts are consistently able to maintain and attract tens of thousands of followers despite being repeatedly banned and shutdown. In addition, many of their posts go viral, giving them greater visibility and extending their reach beyond their follower base alone. These accounts are not managed by Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) such as Xi Wuyi 习五一, who utilizes her credentials and official positions to legitimize her posts. Instead, they operate as anonymous accounts,

25 Hasmath 2024.

26 Zang 2015.

27 Applebaum 2016.

28 Ibid.

29 McIntosh 2020; Applebaum 2016.

30 Van Dijk 1992.

31 See *Daying DN*, <https://weibo.com/u/7390567278>, and *Zhonghua zhiying 01*, <https://weibo.com/u/6373105193>. Both handles are known as "Han Eagle."

32 "Ruhe pingjia weixin gongzhonghao @Tianya Hechu Shi Shenzhou?" (How do you view the Wechat account *Tianya hechu shi shenzhou*?). *Zhihu*, 17 July 2017, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/62440663>. Accessed 8 March 2022. The other Wechat account is named *Lijian fankong*.

with no insight offered into the owner's identity or occupation, thus they also lack the "protection" often enjoyed by VIP accounts with higher social status and closer relationships with social media platforms. Consequently, their strategies to circumvent censorship and their repertoire of contention differ from those of the KOLs and are closer to the tactics used by regular netizens who wish to express similar views in the cyberspace.

Posing as defenders of Han identity and interests, these bloggers specifically create and share Islamophobic content critical of the Hui and Uyghurs, as well as engaging with other social media influencers whenever their topics of focus enter mainstream news. From the tone and narrative framing, it is safe to assume that these posts predominantly cater to Han audiences. While online narratives are not representative voices of the whole population, in the context of discrimination, they are illuminating sources of existing sociopolitical and ethnic pressure points. Research has already shown that online hatred and offline hostility have a mutually reinforcing relationship, a compound retaliation where awareness of one leads to the legitimacy of the other.<sup>33</sup> In China, officially at least, Islamophobia is frowned upon, and openly derogatory and inflammatory online content is frequently censored and deleted. It is, therefore, illuminating to examine what content is allowed to remain in circulation, as that illustrates the extent to which discrimination is allowed and even condoned in public discussion, particularly as these bloggers often use official news sources and commentary to back up their claims.

### Uyghurs: Civilization, Securitization and Confessions

From the Chinese state's perspective, the relationship between the dominant group (the Han) and peripheral peoples such as the Uyghurs is akin to a civilizing mission, where one group, the civilizing centre, engages with the peripheral group from a position of superiority in order to "lead them to modernity."<sup>34</sup> Han-friendly policies encourage Han migration and settlement in Xinjiang, and research has shown that Han people perform better in job markets and educational contexts there in comparison to their Uyghur counterparts.<sup>35</sup> By responding favourably to Han demands, the Chinese state has fostered "a political discourse justifying Han settler presence in minority areas."<sup>36</sup> More recently, the securitization of Xinjiang and the Uyghur population in general has received increasing international attention.<sup>37</sup> However, owing to domestic propaganda and censorship, the Chinese public and grassroots commentators tend to treat international concerns with scepticism.

When discussing Uyghurs and Xinjiang, Islamophobic bloggers typically oscillate between presenting Xinjiang as a heterotopia and embracing Sinicized, or "reformed," Uyghurs, and issuing severe warnings about the constant threat of terrorism and the harsh consequences for those who deviate from the Sinicized path. The emphasis is on the ongoing threat of terrorism in the region, which accords with official securitization narratives. One article opens by lamenting how terrorism is the scar that mars Xinjiang:

What's the first thing that comes to your mind when thinking about Xinjiang? Apart from delicious grapes, pretty girls and amazing kebabs, there's also an unshakable concern – the issue of safety. Religious extremism is like a dark cloud hanging over everyone's head.<sup>38</sup>

33 Wiedlitzka et al. 2021.

34 Harrell 2001.

35 Zang 2011; 2010.

36 Côté 2011, 100.

37 Roberts 2012; 2018; Smith Finley 2019.

38 "Zongjiao jiduan shili muhou heishou de bage mimi" (8 secrets of the invisible hand behind religious extremism). *Bianjiang fanrong*, 19 February 2017, <https://freewechat.com/a/MzAxODI5MDkyMQ==/2650628076/3/1487452531>. Accessed 7 March 2022.

The author's depiction of Xinjiang as a pure, unspoiled heterotopia echoes a common theme found in state ethnicity narratives.<sup>39</sup> The use of stereotypical and reductionist cultural symbols that set Xinjiang apart from the mainstream and the modern reinforces the widespread and deep-rooted assumptions of Han superiority, a trope often presented in tandem with the Chinese state's civilizing effort in the region.<sup>40</sup> Expressions of gratitude, and indeed panegyrics, are written by both Uyghur and Han authors as they seek to justify the harsh measures of control deployed in the region by highlighting the economic reforms and infrastructural advances made by the CCP. One Uyghur special force agent (*tejing* 特警) wrote:

Shouldn't we be grateful and appreciative of our good lives, and the preferential treatment given to us by the CCP? ... The lives of everyone in Xinjiang have improved greatly since the reform ... we need to be grateful and remember that without the CCP there will be no new China, no Xinjiang and none of this good life that we all share.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, the mayor of Hotan 和田市, a Uyghur cadre, wrote:

Today in Hotan, we walk on wide, paved roads, live in safe and comfortable affordable housing, drink sweet and clear tap water, use clean and cheap natural gas, ride modern cars, harvest from state-subsidized fields, go to free schools, and have annual free medical checkups. Uyghur brothers, do good lives such as these fall from the sky? Should we not appreciate such a good life? We Uyghurs are a grateful ethnic group, wherever we are, we need to remember the kindness of the CCP, and remember to follow the CCP's lead. We need to fight the terrorists and ensure regional stability!<sup>42</sup>

There is, of course, no way to verify whether these posts were actually written by the Uyghurs authorship was attributed to. However, the true identity of the authors of these posts matters less than the message that they convey: Uyghurs can and ought to welcome reform. The moralistic and paternalistic appeal in these writings feeds into the narrative that Uyghur-populated regions were backward before the reform. The Chinese state, embodied by the Han majority, brought modernity to the periphery and so deserves the Uyghur people's gratitude and loyalty. To reject Han culture and influence, by implication, is to sow the seeds of discontent among the peripheral populations, which signals a sinister intent. Instead of showing an awareness of the policies that favour the Han settlers and their deeply embedded privileges in peripheral regions, the authors choose to focus on the supposed decline of Han influence in Xinjiang, which they argue is directly related to the rise of extremism and terrorism and could become a vicious cycle leading to a dangerous future:

If we continue the deeply unfair policies against Han in Xinjiang, then we will see our Han brothers being disheartened and start to leave Xinjiang, leading to the continued Islamification of Xinjiang. Once the population balance is tipped towards Muslims, Islamification will speed up uncontrollably.<sup>43</sup>

By focusing on the issue of declining Han populations in regions such as Xinjiang, these authors assert that the Han have a natural dominance in peripheral regions, and perpetuate the idea that if Han numbers decline, so will Han culture and identity, which is used synonymously with the

39 Zang 2015.

40 Vickers 2014.

41 Ospan 2017.

42 Mushajan 2017.

43 Zhou 2017.

idea of being Chinese. The declining Han influence means less successful Sinicization, which then becomes a security issue for the state, as the Muslim other is seen as fundamentally disloyal to the Chinese nation. These articles typically end with a call to arms, the aggression of which is beyond even the state narrative:

We need to learn to say “no!” to Islam, to say “no!” to Muslims, we need to kill Islamic terrorists! Otherwise, Europe’s today [with an influx of refugees and ongoing terrorist threats] will be Xinjiang’s tomorrow.<sup>44</sup>

Fearmongering, served with a hefty helping of xenophobia, is a common tactic used by these bloggers when discussing Xinjiang:

Western media have reported that countless numbers of Uyghur extremists have escaped the mountainous borders, some even in their 80s, who go to ... the Middle East ... for training in the ISIS and holy war. If they can escape, then surely they can get back in!<sup>45</sup>

Such arguments and narratives support the alleged need to exclude and contain Uyghurs, using bio-political terms, “where the Uyghur people as a whole have come to symbolize an almost biological threat to society that must be quarantined through surveillance, punishment, and detention.”<sup>46</sup> However, it is important to note that the authors do not assign distrustfulness and otherness to the Uyghurs based on their *ethnicity*; indeed, in order to keep state secularization concerns in line with ethnic harmony narratives, they emphasize the contrast between the purity of the Uyghur ethnicity and the toxicity of Islam. These “Uyghurs at risk” narratives are not only presented from an outsider’s perspective but also through the “confessional” blogs in which Sinicized, “model” Uyghurs voice their concerns about the need to separate religion from ethnicity.

The Uyghur ethnic minority is pure and good. Most kids, growing up in good families, are good, pure and grateful. But when they join society, because they are impressionable and not yet sophisticated enough, they can be tempted by religion and change their entire life’s outlook ... Leave religion to the mosques, forbid religion from expanding into secular society.<sup>47</sup>

Using a more belligerent tone, some Han authors warn about extremist practices infiltrating everyday life by positioning Islamic practices as being the opposite of “normal.” In an attack on an article that questioned the increasing Sinicization of Muslims in Xinjiang, one blogger wrote:

The elderly can keep their long beards, that is tradition, fine. But in recent years, owing to the spreading influence of religious extremism, energetic young people and strong middle-aged people have started growing long beards too, which is at odds with their vitality and goes against normal people’s expectations.<sup>48</sup>

Such views align with official media narratives that also make broad generalizations and voice concerns about young impressionable Muslims who do not know any better. An excerpt from *Xinjiang ribao*, which was re-posted by one of the anti-terrorist accounts, argues that:

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Roberts 2018, 1.

47 Ilham 2017.

48 Jinghong 2017c.

Most of the impressionable, confused Muslims live in the rural areas and are poor ... Evil forces are using the excuse of “Hijrah” to take advantage of confused women ... The generation born in the 80s and 90s, young and inexperienced, are unable to tell right from wrong, and they are generally defenceless against terrorist ideas.<sup>49</sup>

The context of “Hijrah” is never explained in these articles, nor the meaning of the word as the author understands it. It is simply implied that “Hijrah” is a foreign idea that lures Chinese Muslims away from the motherland. It can refer to anything from a pilgrimage to migration to the holy land, all of which are described as “terrorist ideas.” This type of “normal versus abnormal” frame narratively divides Xinjiang into a three distinct realms: the heterotopic, “traditional” and backward world of un-Sinicized Uyghurs, who are pure at heart but vulnerable to radicalization; the abnormal, sinister and unlawful world of extremist Islamic influences that pose both a threat and a temptation to these Uyghurs; and the modern and “normal” world where the Han and Sinicized Uyghurs live together in harmony, free from the threat of terrorism. Indeed, in the Uyghur “confessional” posts, religion, Islam and extremism are used synonymously, with the “reformed” Uyghur authors deliberately emphasizing their choice of secularity and Party membership, differentiating themselves from the heterotypic “you”:

Even though I don't do *namaz* [*salah*, Muslim prayer], and I don't read the Quran, I am still kinder than you are. When I was young, I would rescue ants that were drowning in puddles. I would cry when watching moving content on TV. I am saddened by the homeless in Urumqi and I give to them whenever I can. But you, you wage war in the name of the Quran, kill innocent people and destabilize society, and say you will go to heaven – heaven will not open for people with blood on their hands like you. Only hell awaits.<sup>50</sup>

In a similar vein, another author argues that all religions are extreme unless tamed by a strong state, and that the “Sinicization of religion must make sure all religions are guided towards being right and normal (*zhengchang zhengque* 正常正确).”<sup>51</sup> To align with the state discourse on ethnic harmony, the authors construct a narrative where the Uyghur ethnicity is seen as naturally “pure” and “blameless,” whereas religion is fundamentally foreign and can act as an instigator of instability. These narratives often highlight how Xinjiang used to be free from religious influence and that Uyghurs are not meant to be religious at all:

Xinjiang used to be free from religion. Before the 80s, there were only a few thousand mosques in Xinjiang, which grew to tens of thousands in the 80s and 90s. The foolish politicians and regulators back in the day planted the seeds for religious fervour in Xinjiang today, and our religious regulators became religious preachers. They cannot be left blameless!<sup>52</sup>

It is worth noting that in contrast to their attitude and narrative strategies regarding the Hui, these authors are not acting as agents of secularization for the Uyghur community. They reiterate official state narratives and leverage them as a foundation for their own arguments. Their narrative focus here is more to do with showing that the existing state strategy in Xinjiang is effective. By constructing a victim and villain narrative such as this, the authors are able to further their Islamophobic claims without contradicting state ethnic harmony narratives. So long as the Uyghurs are portrayed

49 “Yijilate de benzhi jiqi weihai” (The truth about Hijrah and its dangers). *Xinjiang ribao*, reposted on *Lijian fankong*, 31 May 2016, <https://freewechat.com/a/MzAxODg1Njg3Mg==/2649719638/3?raw>. Accessed 8 March 2022.

50 Ilham 2017.

51 Jinghong 2017c.

52 Ma 2017.



as having no agency in their wrongdoing, then they can be Sinicized and “reformed.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, efforts to secularize and Sinicize Uyghurs in the name of containing domestic terrorist threats in Xinjiang have been frequently lauded by these authors. Furthermore, suggestions are made that such strategies should be adapted for use elsewhere to contain other Muslim populations of concern, such as the Hui.

### Hui: Perceived Demands of the “Troublesome Ethnicity” and Han Victimhood

In contrast to the prevailing view held by the KMT in Republican China, CCP historians have classed the Hui as a distinct ethnicity (*minzu*) since the 1930s.<sup>54</sup> Whereas Uyghur demands for more autonomy and closer ties to the Middle East are viewed as a security threat, the assimilated Hui have been held up as an example of a “model ethnic minority” by the Chinese state.<sup>55</sup> The Hui are therefore not usually targeted by state securitization narratives and are often portrayed in state media as a cooperative and even patriotic ethnic group.<sup>56</sup> Some observers argue that the Hui had until very recently enjoyed greater religious autonomy to the extent that they were able to advocate a Saudi-style Salafism that would have been unimaginable for the Uyghurs.<sup>57</sup> In terms of average educational attainment and political representation at the highest state level, the Hui are also the most successful among all ethnic minorities.<sup>58</sup> Ironically, whereas the Chinese state views the Hui as successful Muslims and the Uyghurs as primitive, Uyghurs regard the Hui as “fake” Muslims, calling them “watermelons” (green on the outside, red on the inside).<sup>59</sup> Generally, the Hui are permitted more freedoms than the Uyghurs: they may wear religious dress, go on state-sponsored (albeit tightly controlled and monitored) pilgrimage and practise their religion openly, all of which makes them more visible in Chinese public life.<sup>60</sup> In addition, a significant proportion of the increase in the number of mosques, which has risen by approximately 78 per cent between 1994 and 2010, is located in Hui regions.<sup>61</sup>

Discussions in Chinese cyberspace reveal that the Hui are perceived to be less tightly controlled and monitored than the Uyghurs, thus creating a sense of discontent and suspicion among Islamophobic bloggers. In contrast to the Uyghurs, who are usually depicted as innocent victims of Islam, the Hui are portrayed in a far more negative light. Online content centred around the Hui often employs scaremongering and dog-whistling tactics designed to evoke fear, anger and resentment among its target audience, as authors seek to promote an awareness of the “risks” posed by the Hui. If the “confessional” blogs are meant to celebrate the Sinicization efforts of Uyghurs, then the aim of the writings on the Hui is to raise the alarm about the supposedly Sinicized ethnic group’s chicanery and deceit. Whereas these Islamophobic narratives construct the Uyghurs as innocent sheep misled by religion, the Hui are depicted as wolves under the guise of sheep.

Online critics of the Hui are particularly aggrieved about the spread of halal and affirmative action in China’s official ethnic minority policies. In far right or populist discourse in the West, halal is often considered to be synonymous with deviance<sup>62</sup> and “stealth jihad,”<sup>63</sup> with halal certification seen as funding terrorist activities and the practice of halal as an activity that connects

53 Miao 2020.

54 *Minzu wenti yanjiushu* 1980.

55 Brophy 2019; Gonul and Roghhofer 2020.

56 Stroup 2021.

57 Al-Sudairi 2016.

58 Li 2008.

59 Côté 2015.

60 Durneika 2018.

61 Erie 2016. This was partly the alleged reason for the removal of Wang Zhengwei as director of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission in 2016, where he was seen as being too “pro-Hui.”

62 Thomas and Selimovic 2015.

63 Hussein 2015.

ordinary Muslims with terrorism.<sup>64</sup> In Han-dominated Chinese cyberspace, halal is also a major source of contention, where Han authors claim that the expansion of halal encroaches upon their own culture and liberties. Even though the Chinese word for halal, *qingzhen* 清真, can mean more than halal itself, as it “involves much more than food ritually prepared according to Islamic dietary prescriptions,”<sup>65</sup> the use of the word *qingzhen* (meaning “pure and true”), versus *dazhong* 大众 (“the masses”), in restaurant settings in Muslim-populated regions, for example, suggests the significance of *qingzhen* in symbolic boundary making.<sup>66</sup> For Islamophobic bloggers, nuanced distinctions between *qingzhen* and halal are lost, as both terms represent something that they consider to be foreign and un-Chinese. Not only is *qingzhen* perceived and framed as an issue of inconvenience but it is also narratively portrayed in conspiratorial terms, pointing to how the visual presence of Islam in public space is a fundamental challenge to China’s sovereignty and Han dominance.<sup>67</sup> Within this narrative, the Hui are presented as a troublesome ethnic group because of their halal practices, which encroach on the freedom and space of other ethnic groups:

Isn’t it strange that the provincial capital of Inner Mongolia is so focused on halal? This gives the impression that the only ethnic minorities in Inner Mongolia are Mongolians and xx [self-censored, xx is used in the original]. The Manchurians, ranking just below Mongolians in their numbers in Inner Mongolia, are completely ignored!<sup>68</sup>

Although at first glance it appears that the author of the above passage is advocating for greater visibility of other, under-represented minorities, it is clear from the overall narrative that these minority groups are juxtaposed with the Hui to emphasize the problematic behaviour of the Hui. For instance, in another post attacking the halal practices of the Hui, the author argues that the Hui exhibit more “othering” behaviour than other, more “native” ethnic groups:

Other truly native ethnic groups such as the Manchus, the Mongols and the Tibetans also have their food preferences, but you don’t see them banning dogs or fish for others!<sup>69</sup>

By referencing the Manchus and the Mongols, who are considered to have not “encroached upon Han liberties” by threatening the dominance of Han culture and identity, the authors are, in essence, advocating the idea that a “good” minority is an invisible minority, or a minority that does not impose upon the majority group’s hospitality by demanding their own minor and othered status. Indeed, the posts warning of the Hui’s “unreasonable halal demands” are often written from Han perspectives and focus on Han grievances and experiences. By contrast, when the topic of halal is raised in Uyghur-centric posts, it is usually in a Uyghur confessional form, with the Uyghur authors lamenting that they had imposed on Han hospitality and kindness by asking Han people to accommodate their food preferences. The authors of such posts often end by declaring that they are now enlightened and will do better in future.<sup>70</sup> Compared to the narrative of innocence and misguidedness surrounding the Uyghurs, the halal practices of the Hui are seen as a form of transgression about which the Han need to be aware and vigilant.

The rhetorical devices used in Hui-related articles are also far more belligerent and sinister, contributing towards a culture of risk where Han audiences would perceive ethnic diversity as a threat. In another piece that specifically references Hui-dominated regions, one wrote:

64 Iner 2019.

65 Gladney 1996, 3.

66 Erie 2018.

67 Ha 2020.

68 Minzu 2017a.

69 Minmin 2017b.

70 Qadir 2018; Abdurixit 2018.

Baidu Baike [a Chinese version of Wikipedia] has just changed the description of stir-fried potato shreds to “halal.” What if the dish is fried using lard? Will the restaurant be smashed up? Will the cook and the owner be apprehended by the police because they had “hurt Muslim’s feelings, and are disrupting ethnic harmony”? ... Under ethnic harmonious policies, all non-pork dishes have become halal, and ... one day, all chicken, beef and fish dishes will be halal too!<sup>71</sup>

Exaggerated rhetoric leading to unfounded conclusions about ethnic violence and implied suggestions that most Hui small business owners are thugs and essentially part of an underground organized crime gang feature frequently in these posts. In one, entitled “Beware of organized crime disguising [itself] as religion and ethnic minorities,” the author writes:

The [Hui] ramen shop owners have a “mutual treaty” among themselves. You can see from the third screenshot that they said ... it is forbidden to open ramen shops of a similar nature within 400m of each other, otherwise “you shall bear responsibility for all financial losses.” This should make you wonder. Why financial losses? Surely competition only leads to decreased profit, not financial losses?<sup>72</sup>

By adding a link to an article reporting on local conflicts between Hui ramen shop owners, the author further implies that Hui business owners band together, follow their own rules and operate as a distinct ethnic entity outside of the law. The Han author goes on to stress that local policing authorities “should not confuse ethnic unity with unity with criminals,” and goes as far as to argue that the Hui, if left unchecked, have the potential to subvert the Chinese (i.e. Han) state. Here, again, Han authors proclaim to tolerate minority practices and behaviour – but with the caveat that such behaviour must not challenge the political dominance of the Han. This is closely tied in with the “Han as underdogs” narrative in which authors dress their grievances against halal as a form of repression of their own freedoms. One author, for example, highlights that Han students in Ningxia University (in the Hui autonomous region) were upset by the lack of non-halal provision on campus:

A university that does not provide non-halal food is encroaching upon Han students’ rights ... This is discrimination ... Anti-Han sentiment is rife on the campus, the University is now practically an Islamic extremist institution!<sup>73</sup>

The sense of outrage caused by halal being the main and usual option on offer frames a discursive attempt to depict Han food as the “normal” food, thus using concepts such as naturalness to legitimize and maintain privilege.<sup>74</sup> Such cultures of privilege naturalize inequality and mean that the beneficiaries will seek to preserve their privilege when they feel their position is threatened.<sup>75</sup> In this particular article, the author calls on the university’s management, and the Party branch in particular, to intervene, and suggests that any “ambiguous attitude” towards Han student grievances would imply that these authorities were supportive of religious extremism. This type of narrative framing is common in other parts of the world, where anti-halal campaigns often use consumer rights as a way to legitimize their claims.<sup>76</sup> However, the Chinese case is unique in that the authors see themselves as raising the alarm about the threat posed by the Hui, of which they believe the

71 Minmin 2017b.

72 Zhifou 2018.

73 Rong 2017.

74 Cole et al. 2012.

75 Ferber 2012.

76 Hussein 2015.

Chinese state is oblivious. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, for example, there were numerous posts decrying the “special treatment” received by those who requested halal options for their food:

Only certain religious groups [i.e. Muslims] will use public money to further their own “religious beliefs.” When the pandemic is ravaging, to come this far from locked-down regions with no one to stop them, and asking government officials to drive out to buy halal food for their consumption, how can that be possible if they are not Muslims? Halal certification didn’t even exist a few hundred years ago, did they starve then? They’ve been emboldened by our accommodation of their increasingly ridiculous requests!<sup>77</sup>

Central to this victimhood narrative is the idea of Han sacrifice and Han accommodation of the unreasonable demands of minority groups, which serve only to embolden the “other’s” push for greater dominance in the cultural and political sphere. Here, halal practices are used as a signifier of alienness and otherness to provoke and outrage sympathetic readers.

Ironically, there is some evidence that the state is promoting halal production and management because it wants to use the “brand” of Chinese Hui ethnicity in a “cultural ambassador” role in Sino-Muslim world trade.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, the official media have also picked up on the so-called pan-halal problem, contributing towards the moral panic that halal, and by extension Islam, is becoming “a problem of excess” in some regions.<sup>79</sup> This type of discursive focus assigns to halal, or pan-halal, sinister motives and the fostering of a “religious extremist atmosphere.” Authors indiscriminately assign to all halal-related activities, ranging from fierce competitive behaviour to everyday purchases, a connection to potential terrorist actions.<sup>80</sup> Because the legal definition of halal and the discursive power of accepting or rejecting it lies with the state, these Islamophobic posts try to shape their own narrative to align with the state’s grander narrative in order to lend themselves legitimacy.

Similarly, affirmative action has long been blamed by dominant groups for supposedly discriminating against them – otherwise known as “reverse discrimination.”<sup>81</sup> In recent years, resentment against unwarranted minority privileges (for example, in relation to college entrance requirements) has become an increasingly strong current in Han nationalism.<sup>82</sup> While all ethnic minorities in China benefit from affirmative action policies, the Hui come in for particularly harsh criticism in the Chinese cyberspace and, again, are portrayed as the most “troublesome” and “sneaky” of all ethnicities, unchecked in their quest for further preferential treatment and power:

The Hui in Ningxia [Hui autonomous region] have the highest points added to their Civil Service Exam scores, no other ethnicity is as greedy and as shameless as the Hui.<sup>83</sup>

Unlike the infantilizing language used to describe Uyghurs, the language in Hui-centric posts is often belligerent, aggressive and designed to whip up fear. In these articles, the Hui are often ominously referred to as “some people” or “certain groups” (*mouxieren* 某些人); sometimes the word Hui is censored, using asterisks or “xx,” to further support the oppressed-Han victim narrative. Labels such as “lazy, ungrateful and greedy” are often used to describe the Hui. In a purported “open letter” to the provincial mayor of Guizhou, for example, the author raises an alarm to “save the Han children!”:

77 Han Eagle 2020. Quotation marks in the original.

78 Ho 2013.

79 Lan and Navera 2021.

80 Ibid.

81 Berbrier 2000.

82 Leibold and Chen 2014.

83 Han Eagle 2018a.

The Han people have been quite tolerant of the clearly unfair ethnic policies in the last forty years. They know as the dominant ethnicity, they have to be generous and accommodating ... Yet some people have been pushing too far, challenging the very basis of Han survival, tormenting their soul, even taking “hostage” [the future of] their children! Ceaseless and shameless in their demands, they have forced [the Han] to finally speak up!<sup>84</sup>

Although Guizhou is home to numerous ethnic minorities, such as the Miao 苗族, Dong 侗族 and Tujia 土家族, it is the Hui who bear the brunt of attacks in many of these posts and who are often compared unfavourably with their counterparts. The victimhood narrative is even more evident here, as the authors appear to genuinely believe that their rights and privileges are being eroded by affirmative action policies. This kind of victim narrative is important because social problems are not fully constructed until victims are made apparent.<sup>85</sup> The purpose of these Hui-centric pieces is to raise awareness of what the authors view as a dangerous imbalance in ethnic relationships in China. In another article decrying the educational affirmative policies in Ningxia, the author, writing from an emotionally distressed parent’s point of view, claims that such policies are turning ethnic minority groups into social outcasts:

My child ... has returned home and said to me ... “they have elite blood, they can get extra points, I’m so envious!” I’ve always taught my kid ... our country will not let down those who work hard. But my kid doesn’t live in a vacuum, he will see the world for himself, and we are worried he will start to think “in Guizhou, working hard is not as important as being born a minority”! He will no longer love his hometown, no longer believe in fairness, honesty and virtue.”<sup>86</sup>

Similar to the moral panic created by antagonistic narratives on pan-halal, here the authors attempt to whip up anxiety about the subjugation of the Han by claiming that many Han parents are choosing to change their ethnicity to Hui in order to overcome the discrimination they are suffering at the hands of affirmative policies. In another article, the author claims that:

There’s a growing trend of changing your children’s ethnicity due to some objective and external reasons [in reference to the affirmative education policies]. After a few generations, Han children will think their ancestors are not Han! ... I hope Han people can have a bit more spine. So what if we face structural discrimination? The Han race is a self-sufficient race and we have never relied on handouts, we will make our own successes.<sup>87</sup>

The authors of these Hui-centric posts appropriate anti-discrimination claims to argue that the Han majority are the ones at risk of being discriminated against, similar to how white nativists also turn anti-racist rhetoric on its head.<sup>88</sup> They claim that the Hui are playing the “ethnicity card” in China, in a similar vein to how white nativists argue that ethnic minorities play the race card in the US.<sup>89</sup> Despite affirmative action being open to all ethnicity minorities, these authors make a specific case against the Hui. The prominence of such claims is enhanced when viewed with other content posted by the account, such as the Hui being the most demanding of Muslim groups regarding halal restrictions, etc. These posts focus on Hui-dominated Ningxia where affirmative action for the Hui is seen as disadvantaging Han candidates, with one author describing affirmative policies as

84 Qin Han 2018.

85 Holstein and Miller 1990.

86 Han Eagle 2018b.

87 Minmin 2017c.

88 Berbrier 2000.

89 Bloch, Taylor and Martinez 2020.

“shackles” for Han people, especially Han children.<sup>90</sup> Decrying the perceived unfairness and “discrimination” against the Han, they are blind to the exemptions and advantages conferred by their dominant group privilege, including Han dominance in the labour market and the disadvantages suffered by minority groups either structurally or as a part of their day-to-day experience. There is an assumption that by virtue of being the dominant group in China, the Han *should* have privilege and decision-making power – including in decisions such as what food is served on flights and who has what access to which institution.

In contrast, in Uyghur-centric narratives, Sinicized Uyghurs are welcomed and the affirmative policies for Uyghurs are discussed in patronizing and paternalistic tones, rather than from an antagonistic standpoint. While halal is still an issue, it is discussed as a “past transgression” and there is expressed approval of how it is controlled in Xinjiang.<sup>91</sup> Owing to the heightened sensitivity surrounding the topic of Uyghurs in China, these Islamophobic accounts strategically align themselves with the state’s narrative on this issue in order to seek a form of paternalistic protection. They discuss and promote the state’s narrative of reform and re-education in Xinjiang, aiming to portray it as a successful model for counter-terrorism strategies. Conversely, owing to the comparatively lower level of state attention directed at the Hui population, these accounts exhibit a more confrontational attitude towards the Hui community.

The animosity towards the Hui could in part stem from inter-group competition. According to official statistics, the Hui are the most economically successful Chinese Muslim minority group<sup>92</sup> and benefit from their political advantages over the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, the Han are more economically powerful than the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.<sup>94</sup> However, compared to the dominant Han, the Hui remain a marginalized group with relatively little influence in the political and economic affairs of China; their influence over the regional economy and security, as claimed in Hui-centric blogs, is vastly exaggerated.<sup>95</sup> When comparing the thematic overtones of the kind of content produced by these accounts, we can see that the Hui warning posts rhetorically mirror the Uyghur “confessional” posts: they appeal to the grander narrative in order to legitimize their claims. The authors are careful to appear to follow the official line, because overt hostility is likely to result in their accounts being banned or suspended.

In contrast to how “confessional” blogs strip away agency from the Uyghurs, the Hui-centric warning posts aim to promote awareness of the Hui’s deceit and how the Hui’s intra-group cohesion and non-conforming identity should be viewed as a threat to China’s ethnic harmony and the country’s political stability. The Uyghurs are portrayed as innocent, unsophisticated and at risk of being misled but having the potential to reform. The Hui, on the other hand, are depicted as being subversive, manipulative, brimming with political ambition, and keen to exploit affirmative action policies and ethnic harmony narratives for their own gain. They are portrayed as betraying the trust and the goodwill of the Han, who have long made accommodations for them. Hui-centric authors describe the Hui as “two-faced people,” a term regularly used in the CCP’s official narrative to denote those who publicly proclaim loyalty to the Party while secretly working against it in private. The similarity of the Hui to the Han in terms of their appearance makes the former’s lifestyle and religious differences even more of a betrayal: they *should* be the most *Chinese* (i.e. similar to Han) ethnic group, and if they choose not to be, then their non-conformity must be driven by motives of treachery. If the Uyghurs can be forgiven for being “confused” about the nature of their relationship with their Muslim neighbours, the Hui cannot. Any attempts to promote Islamic or Hui culture are treated with suspicion. For example, one author wrote the following

90 Qin Han 2018; Rong 2017.

91 Wang 2017.

92 Ho 2013.

93 Côté 2015.

94 Dillon 2013.

95 Chuah 2004.

in response to news that some schools in a Hui community in Hebei were introducing books that explain the practices and traditions of the Hui:

I don't want to single out any religion but when people misuse their power to push religion into schools, how come it's always that one religion? You never see people propagating Buddhism in schools! Don't blame people when we are anti this religion, they are too greedy and they have chosen to stand opposite the state and the people.<sup>96</sup>

Another post contends that the Hui have long since been Sinicized and so any attempts to gain a distinctive identity are duplicitous. Because these authors perceive ethnic minority practices as fundamentally backward and barbaric, and foreign influences such as Arabic culture as sinister, their narrative allows no interpretation other than assigning such actions treacherous intentions.

Hui culture is not Islamic culture or Arabic culture. The Hui are not Arabs. In fact, traditional Hui architecture and clothing have strong Chinese elements. The Hui villages in Guangxi ... have been thoroughly Sinicized, with classic Chinese style pagodas ... that's what looks nice ... as opposed to Arab-style mosques, which are strange and alien.<sup>97</sup>

The contrast in narratives, between the subversive Hui and the innocent Uyghurs, is particularly striking when the authors themselves compare the two ethnicities in posts. In many Hui-centric warning posts, the authors openly praise the de-radicalization process in Xinjiang and express support for the same policies to be implemented in inland Muslim-populated regions such as Ningxia. Discussing the pan-Halal issue in Ningxia, one writes:

Netizens have pointed out that the halal brand is now controlled very closely in Xinjiang. Han restaurants have to have Uyghur menus too, the reason being everyone can have all sorts of food – note the usage of “everyone.” Praise Xinjiang! Let this be a warning to the “two-faced” people in Ningxia, if you make trouble, then trouble will find you.<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, in response to an academic's critique of China's current ethnic policies, another author offered this rebuff:

The historian wrote “[If the religious practice] is not a security threat to the state, then the state has no right to intervene.” Let me translate this for you: he's actually saying: “we haven't revolted yet, so you have no right to intervene.” He also states: “a Hui autonomous region should of course reflect Hui culture and religion, and not Han culture.” Again, what he really means is: “ethnic autonomous regions belong to ethnic minorities, and all other ethnicities should bow to their rule.”<sup>99</sup>

Together, these Hui-centric warning posts sound the alarm against a future in which the Han lose their dominant group privileges and have to bow to the whims of ethnic minorities and “unbalanced” ethnic policies. Indeed, one commentary goes so far as to liken the living conditions of the Han in Hui autonomous regions to the conditions in concentration camps in Nazi Germany.<sup>100</sup> With their “wake-up calls,” the authors clearly disagree with the state narrative that

96 Jinghong 2017a.

97 Jinghong 2017c.

98 Lijiang 2017.

99 Minzu 2017b.

100 Minmin 2017a.

depicts the Hui as the model minority and a bridge to the Arab world.<sup>101</sup> This is a typical secularization tactic, where the “concerned parties,” posing as Han patriotic flag wavers, are the securitizing actors, attempting to convince both society (the core of which they see as represented by the Han majority) and the state of the threats posed by the Hui.<sup>102</sup> Using conspiracy and fearmongering tactics, these authors are calling for extraordinary measures to be used against the Hui, just as they have been used against the Uyghurs.

In order to lend legitimacy to their claims, these authors take particular care not to challenge state policies outright and instead they argue that these policies have been abused and misused. There are two parts to this constructed narrative. The first depicts the Han as a long suffering, benevolent and accommodating dominant group, whose efforts at creating ethnic harmony are being undermined by the ungrateful and manipulative Hui minority group. Second, the emphasis is made that the authors do not have a grievance against affirmative policies per se but rather the beneficiaries of these policies, who are greedy and ungrateful. For example:

The intention behind these [affirmative] policies are good, but it has now gone wrong. Not only do these policies accommodate the laziness and greediness of certain groups [the Hui], they also fracture the relationship between Han and other ethnicities [who are not so greedy], they shake the foundation of Chinese culture, destroy the spirit of fairness in modern civilization, this is not just an issue of adding points to exams, but it's a question of national security and about the future fate of the nation!<sup>103</sup>

This kind of reversal tactic is similar to those used by white nativists who contend that being against immigration is not about being racist; rather it is about being patriotic and upholding the law. They also argue that affirmative action amounts to reverse racism and victimizes the majority race.<sup>104</sup> Whereas white nativists focus on their love for their own race to avoid the charge of instigating hatred towards another race,<sup>105</sup> Han-centric authors draw attention to the abuses of the Han's generosity and kindness in order to make the claim that it is the Hui who are “asking for too much.” In one online article, the author claims that the Hui will never be “grateful” for the help that they have received, openly calling into question their loyalty to the Chinese nation.<sup>106</sup>

Like much of the misinformation circulating on the internet, these warning posts do not substantiate their claims with credible sources or data. Instead, the legitimacy of their grievances and subsequent demands rests on how convincingly the author can suggest that the Hui are a threat to national security and political stability. Frequent accusations of disloyalty are levelled at the Hui, who are described as “two-faced people” who resort to subterfuge to achieve their own political ends and who, ultimately, represent a ticking time bomb for the Chinese state.<sup>107</sup> Together with the “confessional” blogs on Uyghurs, these narratives appeal to the grander narrative on state security and sociopolitical stability for paternalistic protection, and contribute to the further securitization of ethnic minorities in China.

As agents in the securitization process, these grassroots accounts do not have the same influence as state actors in effecting change.<sup>108</sup> Consequently, they rely on seeking paternalistic protection through state narratives. The context of their securitization tactics reflects the contrast between how the state perceives the security threats posed by the Uyghurs and those posed by the Hui. These accounts

101 Ho 2013.

102 Balzacq 2011.

103 Qin Han 2018.

104 Bloch, Taylor and Martinez 2020.

105 Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997.

106 Han Eagle 2018a.

107 Minzu 2017a; Minmin 2017b; Jinghong 2017b; Han Eagle 2017.

108 Balzacq 2005.



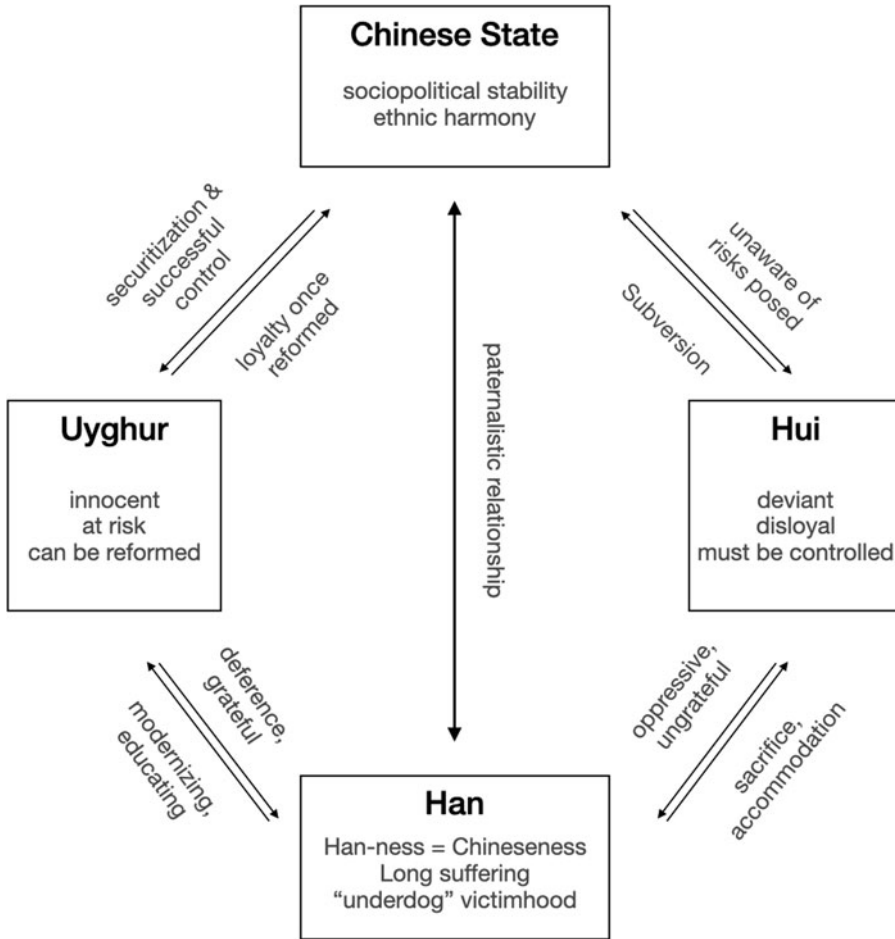


Figure 1. Summary of Key Narratives of Sampled Articles

largely refrain from exacerbating tensions with the Uyghurs, as this is a highly charged topic and any deviation from the official narrative could backfire. Conversely, they appear to believe the state overlooks the security issues concerning the Hui, thus they feel compelled to raise awareness and alert others, employing harsher and more aggressive language while doing so. The authors of these accounts consider the state’s securitization of Uyghurs as sufficient justification for their own actions, while the task of addressing the imagined Hui problem falls to them. Figure 1 presents a summarized diagram of the narratives found in these posts and their intertwining relationship.

### Conclusion

This paper does not set out to delineate ethnic experiences in China, or indeed discuss the relationship between the Han majority and ethnic minorities. The key issue explored in this paper is how Islamophobic actors, recently on the rise in China’s cyberspace, perceive and contest ethnic relationships in China, and how their rhetoric of Han privilege and victimhood interacts with and counteracts state narratives on the topic.

The recent state securitization of the Uyghurs has had a spillover effect towards the Hui, and general Islamophobia is on the rise both as a byproduct of, and bolstered by, official narratives on religion and Sinicization as a whole. At first glance, secularization lies at the heart of these Islamophobic

narratives, as both the Hui and Uyghur are seen as vulnerable to radicalization. Yet there is a critical difference: the state securitizes the Uyghurs, so the bloggers do not have to. Instead, acting as cyber ideological vigilantes, the bloggers use their narratives to securitize the Hui. Their key underlying argument is that Uyghurs are innocent, misled and uncultured, and can be forgiven for thinking that they share kinship ties with their Muslim neighbours owing to geographical and physical similarities. Either through a lack of awareness or a deliberate disregard for the true circumstances, the consensus among these authors appears to be that re-education and de-radicalization strategies are effective in preventing Uyghur separatism and that such threats are currently under control. The Hui, on the other hand, should know better: they have long been Sinicized and, with their modicum of economic success, are viewed as a model ethnic minority. Within the Hui narratives, however, is the suggestion that trouble is brewing within this “subversive” group, as the Hui group identity grows stronger by the day. The authors of these narratives feel they must sound the alarm about this hidden threat as many are oblivious. Where the rhetorical point for the Uyghur narratives is Han pride, a strong sense of Han victimhood permeates the Hui narratives, and the authors often demand remedial action by the authorities, who they believe should represent primarily Han interests.

These grassroots narratives, and their contrasting attitudes towards two Muslim groups, illustrate the nuances of Han privilege and minority discrimination in present day China. Just as, historically, Chinese intellectuals have looked to the “other,” the generalized enemy, to narrate the Chinese nation,<sup>109</sup> Han-centric views of ethnic minorities are an illustration of how Han nationalists have tried to define the Chinese state and who “belongs.”<sup>110</sup> Those who conform, whether through voluntary means or by force, will be accepted, and those who do not are cast out. Even among those who do assimilate, their acceptance is conditional upon them not challenging the dominance of the majority group. Otherwise, they run the risk of being scapegoated for Han discontent: assimilation-promoting and affirmative action policies can quickly be used by the majority to exemplify Han sacrifice and accuse the recipients of ungratefulness. Aside from the underlying rationale, which is based on the assumption that the Han are superior to minority groups, there is also a particular danger in these victim claims and their potential to rationalize discrimination. The victim mentality exonerates those who argue that the Han majority’s rights have been eroded from responsibility and relieves them of any moral culpability.<sup>111</sup> It is perhaps no surprise, then, that these narratives have now been expanded to demonstrate a general support of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as the authors see the same “security concerns” propagated by Russia’s victimhood narrative against NATO in the purported struggle of the Han versus the minority groups. This is why domestic opinion regarding minority and disadvantaged groups is particularly important in these uncertain times. Even with the number of followers “moderated” and suppressed through censorship, these Islamophobic accounts are by no means in the extreme minority, and the targets of their ire are not limited to minority groups and Muslims. Xenophobia, misogyny, racism and imperialist war-mongering frequently dine at the same table. The rising tides of nativist and inward-looking public opinion can be stoked, but not so easily tamed, and China’s domestic opinion regarding minorities, especially those perceived as subversive, remains volatile. Thus, China’s leaders are faced with the challenge of balancing the fragile ethnic relationships inside its borders with the nation’s ambitions for a peaceful international rise.

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