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Impaired, “easy prey” saved by the she-empowering state: official narratives of “Xinjiang women” in China’s “People’s War on Terror”

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ABSTRACT

Feminist approaches to international security have revealed persistent gendered stereotypes in the construction of women in contexts of political violence and terrorism, including the Global War on Terror. Acknowledging the parallelism with the United States-led enterprise in its endeavor to “save” a female population and re-posing one of the most significant questions in gender-informed security studies, this article asks “Where are the women in China’s ‘People’s War on Terror’ (PWOT)?” It takes the idea of agency as pivotal in answering this question and investigates how the Chinese state has (im)mobilized, through concealment or deployment, the idea of and potential for agency when positioning Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim women in Xinjiang as specific subjects in the context of the PWOT. The article reveals the establishment of a gendered hierarchy of power in the Chinese counterterrorism playbook, one that fixes “Xinjiang women” as securitized and passive victims in need of rescuing by a state that continues to suppress their agency, despite official claims to the contrary.

KEYWORDS Gender; agency; terrorism; China; Uyghur

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Introduction

Starting in 2009, the Chinese authorities launched a series of initiatives aimed at eradicating the wearing of veils among Muslim women from the Uyghur ethnic minority, a Turkic group native to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the northwest.¹ According to the XUAR’s official Women’s Federation, veils were “not a form of expression of ethnic dress but rather of extreme religion ... a type of ignorant and backward way of thinking ...

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not suited for the developments of the times” (US CECC 2010). The association commended Uyghur women who abandoned the garment for their engagement in “healthy cultural activities” (US CECC 2010). Using slogans such as “Let our hair flow and reveal our beautiful faces. Abandon old and outdated customs” (Demick 2014), the regional authorities have continued to encourage Uyghur women (when not coercing them) into becoming “practitioners of modern culture” (AFP 2013). Through the organization of public fashion shows and makeover tutorials or by pressuring them into cosmetology careers (Grose 2019), the Chinese state invites women from the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities of Xinjiang² – often collectivized in official Chinese narratives as “Xinjiang women” – to join “1.3 billion Chinese sons and daughters to realize the great Chinese dream” (Demick 2014). This is, of course, provided that they abandon what the government perceives as old, unhealthy, and “backward” ways related to “religious extremism” and “terrorism.”

While efforts to eradicate the wearing of veils among women in Xinjiang in contemporary China date back to the 1990s, if not the Cultural Revolution (*BBC Monitoring Service Asia Pacific* 1997), these initiatives have acquired a distinct political dimension in the context of the Global War on Terror (GWOt); the latter facilitated China’s reframing of past tensions with the Uyghurs as a problem of “terrorism” and legitimized the launch of a localized “People’s War on Terror” (PWOt)³ in Xinjiang (Roberts 2020). The same climate that saw the denigration of burkas or niqabs as symbols of “religious radicalization” and “terrorism” in some Western countries (Parvez 2011) has seen religious attire, including jilbabs, hijabs, burkas, or combinations of black veils and robes (Abdilih 2013; Ho 2015; Jin 2015; Qiao 2011; *Reuters* 2013) become proscribed in China as “garments of extremism” (*Xinhua* 2014).

Drawing on existing critiques of the gendered dimensions of the GWOt, this article finds analytical potential in re-posing one of the most productive and significant questions in gender-informed security studies, “Where are the women?” (Cohn and Enloe 2003; Parashar 2011), in the context of China’s PWOt. In trying to answer this question, we examine the “enduring absence” (Youngs 2006, 4) of women’s voices and the subjugated female subjectivities in official Chinese discourses of counterterrorism. The idea of agency, broadly understood as the capacity for an actor to “process social experiences and respond to them through personal and/or social change” (Ortbals and Poloni-Staudinger 2014, 336), is pivotal to this study. Acknowledging the constructed nature of agency, we have no intention of drawing any essentialist conclusions or ascribing Uyghur women any particular legitimate political agency (Auchter 2012). Rather, our aim is to highlight how the Chinese state has (im)mobilized, through concealment or deployment, the idea of and potential for agency when positioning Uyghur women as subjects in the context of the PWOt. In doing so, and to unveil the gendered hierarchy of power that underpins the Chinese counterterrorism playbook, we

investigate Chinese state interpretations and denials of agency in the light of pre-existing gendered stereotypes of women, violence, and terrorism.

The article proceeds in three sections. The first examines the scholarly literature exploring gendered narratives of women, violence, and terrorism and identifies dominant stereotypes that depict women as inherently peaceful individuals and passive victims of terrorism, and female political violence as a “gender transgression” perpetrated by irrational, *non-agentic* individuals (Gentry and Sjoberg 2007, 7). We use the themes reflected in these stereotypes as an analytical framework within which to investigate the gendered dimension of China’s PWoT discourse and the practices that it enables.

Next, we reflect on the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) self-proclaimed contemporary projects of feminism and equality and the counterproductive nature of these efforts. We examine how the Chinese state security discourse is based on a “traditional”/“extremist” binary that makes sense of ethnic-minority religious and cultural practices in ways that sustain a gendered hierarchy of power.

The third section moves on to identify the gendered dimension of official Chinese narratives constructing “terrorism” and “extremism” in Xinjiang. Here, we examine the representation of Uyghur women as passive and “backward” subjects who are victims of male-induced “extremism.” We also explore the construction of the self-image of the Chinese state as a masculinized savior-like entity offering a pathway to an emancipatory modernity project and the ascription of a specific understanding of women’s agency – “she power” (*ta Liliang* 她力量) (Li and Chen 2015) – to “trained” ethnic-minority women in Xinjiang. This section also unpacks the political cogs and wheels of this gendered discourse. Here, we draw attention to the constructed nature of the dichotomy between “traditional” Uyghur culture and the “backward” ways of life promoted by “extremists” (*Global Times* 2015), the broader strategic interests served by this binary, and the ways in which the PWoT obscures alternative Uyghur women subjects – or how the enforced inscription of “she power” enables a series of practices that, far from “liberating” them into “modernity,” neutralize any possibility of agency or emancipation.

We reveal the mechanisms that sustain a gendered hierarchy of power in the context of China’s counterterrorism efforts by exploring the country’s official discourse on women, “extremism,” and “terrorism” in Xinjiang. Acknowledging the quasi-causal impact of discourse on political outcomes in the realms of international security and terrorism (Jackson 2005; Milliken 1999), we approach Chinese state narratives as a space in which gender imbalances become sedimented, and the possibility of women’s agency is articulated as either absent or denied. We examine a variety of sources that include Chinese government documents and Chinese state media reports, in both English and Chinese, published between 2009 and 2021. This time window enables us to examine the gendered narratives after the Urumqi

Riots, which intensified the securitization of Xinjiang and had a significant impact on how Uyghurs are viewed in China. It also allows a consideration of the PWoT, which has produced some of the most radical and controversial counterterrorism policies in Xinjiang. We consider sources that specifically touch upon women's roles in counter-radicalization and their views of state policies and/or international criticism. Before 2018, many sources were aimed at domestic audiences; afterwards, deradicalization programs were widely reported in the international media. In response to this media coverage, many documents published after 2018 addressed both international and domestic audiences. The inclusion of the "voices" of "real" Uyghur women illustrates the extent of co-optation in constructing the discourse surrounding "Xinjiang women." Together, these sources constitute a representative illustration of the broader Chinese security narrative on Uyghur women aimed at both domestic and international audiences.

Women, violence, and wars on terror

Studies at the intersection of terrorism and gender have examined the processes by which discourses surrounding both concepts, as well as concepts of women and violence, are socially constructed (Breen-Smyth 2014; Gentry and Whitworth 2011; Gunning 2007; Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning 2009). The existing literature has established paradigms to problematize the essentialist racist and sexist assumptions about female terrorists and the role of women in political violence and activism (Khalid 2011; Nayak 2006, 11; Taras 2013; Yildiz and Verkuyten 2013).

Gentry and Sjoberg (2016, 149–150) helpfully establish a framework that can be used to analyze the presence or absence of Uyghur women in the state discourse on counterterrorism: "Those with a vested interest in a particular political order, including a particular gender order, often attribute particular motivations to (women) terrorists as they analyze their stories." With regards to these motives, Gentry and Sjoberg (2007) identify three narratives – namely, "mother, monster, and whore" – in the discourse surrounding women's participation in political violence. Central to these representations is the idea present in narratives of the GWoT that women are "acted upon rather than ... actors themselves" (Hunt and Rygiel 2006, 1). As Auchter (2012, 129) puts it, the assumption is that women participate in terrorism "because they are being used by men, as merely passive instruments of men's agency." As a consequence, these narratives lead to a reification of the patriarchal order in which women's liberation is recuperated to perpetuate the patriarchal hierarchy (Brohi 2008, 133; Leung 2003).

A glance at counterterrorism policies in China and the Western-led GWoT reveals parallels that go beyond the proscription of Islamic veils and that demonstrate the global effects of the GWoT's discriminatory anti-Muslim

rhetoric, which has been seized upon by regimes around the world to reframe pre-existing domestic conflicts as “terrorist” emergencies (Bhatia 2005, 13). The GWoT was framed by political elites as a war partly fought to “free the women of Afghanistan from the cruel oppression of the Taliban” (Allison 2013, 320). This involved casting “native women as victims, American men as their hyper-masculine rescuers, and native men as cowardly oppressors” (Auchter 2012, 128; see also Hunt and Rygiel 2006).

In China, where Islam had already become securitized as “religious extremism” in the 1990s, the government used 9/11 to reframe contemporary Uyghur-related ethnic conflict as “terrorism” (Rodríguez-Merino 2019). This narrative shift paved the way for Beijing to intensify its repression in Xinjiang under the banner of counterterrorism and, from 2014, as a “people’s war” against “terrorism” (*China Daily* 2014). Echoing the GWoT logic, the PWoT rests on the framing of women wearing veils or engaging in “illegal” religious practices as passive victims of “extremism” who need to be rescued by the same state that will punish the “native” male “terrorists” (Yixiaocuo 2019). Only when freed from the veiled “evils” of “terrorism,” separatism, and “religious extremism” will these women be able to assert their agency by choosing modernity over “backwardness” and darkness. Meanwhile, while the GWoT involved a “strategic purchase of women’s rights” (Allison 2013, 321) to attach a moral code to an agenda that was otherwise disengaged from feminist concerns, the PWoT (also partly conducted in the name of liberating Uyghur women from “extremism”) has been related to a broad range of projects.

In China’s PWoT, feminism is instrumentalized to co-opt women and those who support the project of women’s emancipation. Framed as “liberating women,” this state-led effort transcends any emancipatory (feminist) agenda, suggesting instead an attempt to assimilate Uyghurs into the Chinese nation, which Western legislatures and scholarly investigations have found constitutive of genocide (see Roberts 2020; Smith Finley 2020). This agenda involves the large-scale internment of Uyghurs in what China refers to as “vocational education and training centers” (Lao 2019) and critics describe as “re-education camps” (Thum 2018), the promotion of inter-ethnic marriages (*Deutsche Welle* 2014; Wong 2014), the mass labor transfer of ethnic minorities to other Chinese regions (Xu et al. 2020), and the increasing imposition of birth controls on ethnic minorities (*Associated Press* 2020).

Reflecting on our own role in the discursive construction of women in the counterterrorism regime, we as scholars – one Western and one non-Western – seek to avoid co-opting the language of women’s rights and empowerment (Brohi 2008, 11), or speaking for those who do not necessarily seek our representation. We take seriously the notion of agency in examining power relations in China’s PWoT, but, in doing so, we seek to avoid presuming Uyghur women to be active agency seekers or inscribing their subjectivities with the desire for liberal agency (Auchter 2012, 128). A pre-existing idealized

notion of gender itself might produce hierarchy and exclusion and impair understanding of female participation in politics. We recognize that writing about agency might also reinforce the agent/victim dichotomy under which the Chinese government's counterterrorism discourse operates. Instead of prescribing how Uyghur women should live, we focus on understanding their presence and absence in China's counterterrorism discourse to reveal the gendered hierarchy of power on which that discourse is based.

Contextualizing China's gender discourse

Chinese state narratives of terrorism and counterterrorism have not emerged in a discursive vacuum. Beyond sharing the "civilizational" impulse of the GWoT, the PWoT can be read in the light of China's broader discourses on gender and equality. In this sense, though the Chinese government does not use the term "agency," its co-optation of Uyghur women in its counterterrorism efforts relies heavily on a state-sanctioned feminist discourse that emphasizes the role of the state in empowering women and re-establishing an agency that it purports was erased by "religious extremism." In justifying its heavy-handed approach to curbing "terrorism" and "extremism," the CCP has sought to present itself as a benevolent patriarch who shoulders the responsibility to "teach" and "correct" people in "backward" south Xinjiang to empower themselves. This rationale bears a resemblance to the one that underpinned the post-9/11 civilizing mission in Afghanistan (Khalid 2011, 23). While in the Western terrorism discourse, gender essentialism often intersects with Orientalism and the colonial past (Gentry and Whitworth 2011; Khalid 2011; Nayak 2006), China's official approach to Uyghur women's liberation must be considered in its own historical context and terms – as part of a fragile reconciliation between political communism and economic capitalism.

China has expressed commitment to equality, including gender equality, to justify its centralized control. The regime set out to challenge the remnants of sexist bourgeois ideology and feudal ideas (Young 1989, 255) and mobilize women to enter into public industry (Ji et al. 2017; Zuo and Jiang 2009). The high rate of female employment under the CCP (ILO 2020) allowed it to present itself as a champion of women's rights and to continue propagating its own understanding of gender equality to all ethnic groups alike, including the Uyghurs. As such, Uyghur women have been offered a sense of "possibility and transformation," including dreams of "a life more modern" through their incorporation into the workforce (Huang 2009, 10–11). This point is important to understanding China's counterterrorism practices, which are closely linked with economic development projects targeting women, best exemplified by Project Beauty (*liangli gongcheng* 靓丽工程), which was initiated in 2011 (Leibold and Grose 2016) with the aim of unveiling Uyghur women by increasing their economic independence. For the

Chinese government, the project illustrates how financial support for female entrepreneurs helps to increase the employment rate while curbing “illegal religious activities” (SCIO 2013).

While the mass-movement-style political campaigns such as Project Beauty raised awareness of gender equality, criticized patriarchal ideology (Zang 2012), and, at least symbolically, instilled a sense of liberation (Zuo 2013), their effects were not all positive. Aimed at subverting bourgeois and feudal gender norms that present virtuous Han women as those without work or education (Zang 2012), the campaigns imposed new gender norms by glorifying the opposite: “iron girls” who are “unwomanly, unmarriageable and unattractive” (Young 1989, 262). The CCP’s promotion of Uyghur women’s liberation is imprinted with an inherited *modus operandi* that turns spontaneous feminist ideas into the constant pursuit of transgressing previously pervasive gender norms. The state-sanctioned elimination of bourgeois and feudal gender norms that operate within a personal/political dichotomy became an invitation for the state’s intrusion into the private sphere (Song 2012); in Xinjiang, this intrusion has been further justified by the securitization of Uyghur women’s religious practices.

This pattern of binary creation has continued with the PWoT. The Chinese state has sought to differentiate “traditional” Uyghur culture from the “backward” ways of life promoted by “extremists” (*Global Times* 2015). By redefining “traditional” and reducing it to the opposite of “backward,” the Chinese authorities have inscribed a state-sanctioned agency in the female Uyghur population. As such, they have defined the place reserved for an ethnic-minority religious and cultural “tradition.” As the “Uyghur [sic] female” presenting the “true picture” of Xinjiang in a Chinese newspaper suggests, the region remains the place where “people can sing and dance at any time and anywhere” (*China Daily* 2020a), in line with long-held cultural stereotypes associated with Uyghurs (Smith Finley 2013). Modern “entrepreneurial” Xinjiang is thus to be recognized in the woman who “dances on a street in the Old Town” of Kashgar (Cui 2020).

This “traditional”/“extremist” binary sustains a gendered hierarchy of power in which burqas or long robes are understood as malign or anomalous. Described as “garments of extremism” (*Xinhua* 2014) or as examples of the “abnormal phenomenon” of “Muslim attire” (Lin 2011), they are fixed in contrast to modernity and as symbols of “some kind of backwardness” (Li 2015). In the official discourse, these garments are “extremist” inasmuch as they are neither an “ethnic-minority costume nor Muslim clothes” (Li 2015).

Warning of the negative impact on Xinjiang’s “traditional” culture of people wearing “religious extremist foreign clothing,” government agencies have attempted to standardize their version of legitimate “traditional” Uyghur clothing (*Guanchazhe* 2014). In an attempt to “rectify the roots,” these agencies have painted an “accurate” and “truthful” picture of what

the “traditional ethnic-minority costumes” should be (Guanchazhe 2014). Certain signature Uyghur attires such as the *doppa* and the *chapan* are framed as the feminine beautiful in contrast to the “backward” ugly practice of wearing full-body robes. The *doppa* has thus become part of Xinjiang brand-building projects intended to attract tourists, evidenced by *doppa* souvenirs and huge *doppa* decorations (Ma 2014). Unlike various veils and headscarves, the Etles silk *chapan*s are promoted in the state media as rightful “ethnic styles” and “traditional Uyghur elements” that contribute to “protecting and inheriting traditional cultures” (Xinhua 2017a). In the articulation of the binary, they are represented as “fashionable” and an inheritance from “the excellent national culture” as opposed to the “ugliness” of the jilbab, a symbol of “the deceit and erosion of illegal religions” (Sun 2014). The binary is given visual expression in the propaganda murals painted next to a mosque in Kashgar (BBC News 2015), in which veiled women are painted onto a dark background in a world where white pigeons are blinded and mirrors reflect death, standing in contrast to the bright and colorful environment in which women wear the *doppa*.

The construction of women in China’s People’s War on Terror

A female impaired political agency

Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer has been constructed as the embodiment of the “terrorist” woman in the Chinese state discourse. Once a successful businesswoman and part of the Chinese government establishment (Li 2009), Kadeer fell into disgrace for her political activism, moving into exile and subsequently recast in official discourse. Accused by Beijing of masterminding the July 2009 riots in Urumqi in which 197 people, mostly Han Chinese, were killed in violent disturbances following the suppression by Chinese police of a Uyghur protest, Kadeer is presented in state narratives as a “mother demon.” She is described as someone of a “ferocious terrorist nature” with the capacity to change identities using “bewildering disguise” (Li 2009). She has been labeled by a Chinese official as “national scum” with an “ugly face and sinister intentions” (Xie 2020), and her activism belittled as motivated by “the ‘desperate fulfillment’ of all her ambitions” masquerading as “lofty goals” (Li 2009). China’s official depictions of Kadeer also refer to her as an evil or failed mother. She is described as someone to whom the “East Turkestan terrorists” look up as their “mother” (Xinhua 2009), and in an interview with an official outlet, her son laments that “she did not fulfil her responsibility as a mother,” busy as she was “with her business” (Liu and Fan 2020).

Similar patterns can be found in Chinese state representations of Uyghur and Kazakh women activists speaking out against the mass internment of ethnic minorities. They have been depicted as impaired agents engaged in

devious behavior stemming from their lack of morality or characterized by a faulty womanhood. Chinese state media describes Uyghur activist Mirigul Tursun, who testified at a US Congressional hearing (US CECC 2018), as a liar with “many infectious diseases including syphilis” (*Global Times* 2021). The account of Tursunay Ziyawudun, a Kazakh woman who appeared in a number of Western media outlets speaking about “mass rape” and “forced sterilization” (see Hill, Campanale, and Gunter 2021; Watson and Wright 2021), is undermined by a Chinese official’s allegation that she was divorced because of infertility and accusations that she falsely claimed to have a biological daughter in Kazakhstan (Chi 2021).

In these ways, the Chinese state has sought to discredit Uyghur women’s activism with references to negligent motherhood or failure to become a mother, or by attributing a moral defect or health condition to the women involved. Perhaps more telling is how the official narrative has seized the agency of these women in their activism. Kadeer is represented as someone whose professional success has stemmed from “tax evasion and fraud” (*Xinhua* 2009) or otherwise from “the country’s beneficial policies” (Liu and Fan 2020). Her political activism is seen not as the result of her own agency, but as driven by “Western anti-Chinese forces” (Liu and Fan 2020). Meanwhile, Tursun and Ziyawudun are not considered political agents in their own right but as “actresses” paid to “patch up” the “lies” of “backstage directors” (Embassy of the PRC in the United Kingdom 2020). This is also the case in the authorities’ representation of Zumrat Dawut, a Uyghur woman interviewed by Western media about abuses in the camps and described as a “teary-eyed actress” (Meng 2021) and “a tool for anti-China forces” (*China Daily* 2021). In official Chinese narratives, these women’s agency is denied. Their actions, whether in the form of economic success or political activism, are not attributed to them but to the Chinese state or its perceived enemies.

Women without agency

This denial of agency to female political activists illustrates a broader feature of Chinese counterterrorism discourse: the depiction of women as passive victims with no capacity to apprehend their reality, impressionable and under patriarchal control. In this light, the “extremism” of Uyghur women appears not as a personal political, cultural, or religious choice but as a condition imposed upon them by patriarchal agents, from husbands to fathers or grandmothers. Official narratives portray women as “personal possessions” of their husbands (Liu 2018a), as passive recipients being “fed” violent and “extremist” “thoughts” (*China Daily* 2020a), as “vulnerable and helpless” victims of their environment (*China Daily* 2020a), or as powerless individuals “born into an extremist family” (Fan and Liu 2018). Actions such as staying at

home without working, getting married, or wearing a veil are portrayed not as a choice but as the result of a patriarchal agency imposed on them (Cui 2018; Liu 2018a). In line with commonly held assumptions about violent female militants, the “extremist” women of Xinjiang are framed in the Chinese state discourse as “easily manipulated” individuals (Gentry and Sjoberg 2016, 149), reproducing the stereotype of the agency-lacking powerless woman.

More telling are the interviews with former “extremists” who have been “transformed” after “training.” Considering their scripted nature, these interviews, used by the state to promote official narratives (Yixiaocuo 2019), provide a window into how the Chinese government represents women’s agency. In the interviews, the women present themselves as ignorant of their alleged misdeeds and as passive instruments of other agents. In line with the stereotype surrounding women’s participation in terrorism, they appear as the “easy prey” of extremist men (Auchter 2012, 129). Following their husbands was the only thing that they knew, for they did not comprehend that their behavior was illegal (*China Daily* 2020a). They wore long black robes because they were told to, so they “followed the trend” (*China Daily* 2020a). The pressure from roommates “weighed much” on their minds, so they dressed as they were told (Liu and Xie 2019). Influenced by “a guy on WeChat,” they preached “extremism” to other people (*China Daily* 2020b, 4:43). Ultimately, it was “under the influence of others” that these women claim that they acted in “extremist” ways (Liu 2018a).

So weak or non-existent is the women’s agency in these narratives that even after severing the association with the influencing agent, the victimized woman is represented as incapable of abandoning “extremism” on her own. She turns into “the crime’s defender” and continues to dress in robes, lives by “distorted doctrines,” and even asks others to do so (Liu 2018a). She cannot realize “the harm of extremism,” so she continues to spread it (Fan and Liu 2018) or to “visit illegal foreign websites” with “extremist content” (*China Daily* 2020a). In the counterterrorism discourse of the Chinese state, women are thus articulated as passive and helpless subjects in need of rescue.

The state savior

The warrior/maiden binary captures another prevalent stereotype in which masculinity and femininity are opposed (Shepherd 2006), that of the active (male) hero subject who rescues the passive (female) object. China’s PWoT discourse represents some “Xinjiang women” as incapable of exiting their “extremist” life by their own means. They need someone to come to their rescue: the Chinese state. Rarely on their own, and often with the help of their father, husband, or other parental figure who persuades them in the

first place, women enter what the Chinese state calls “vocational education and training centers,” starting a journey of state-led transformation (*China Daily* 2020b; Liu 2018a; Liu and Xie 2019). It is the same state that, through the “peaceful liberation of Xinjiang in 1949,” freed Muslim women from having to “have their bodies fully covered” (*Xinhua* 2017a) that rescues them again in the context of a war on terror.

In these facilities, the women, now “trainees,” are assigned a transformation plan built around the study of counter-extremism, laws and regulations, the Chinese language, and “vocational skills” (Liu 2018a). On this path to deradicalization, women let go of the “mental load” of “extremism” (Liu and Xie 2019). The state is the antidote to the “poison” of “extremism,” as one “trainee” explains: “Nine months of studying in the education and training center released my mind. I experienced a tremendous transformation, both physically and mentally” (*China Daily* 2020b).

It is also the Chinese state that is portrayed as providing a moral code to women who were previously lacking one. Following the “training,” the narrative continues, the same “Xinjiang women” once incapable of distinguishing good from evil can now apprehend “the difference between religion and extremism” or “what is legal and what is illegal” (Liu and Xie 2019). Through 736 “oath meetings” under the banner “Study the Constitution, Eliminate the Extremist,” 150,000 women from the Kizilsu Kirgiz Autonomous Prefecture abandoned their ignorance and now “can tell the difference between right and wrong” (Liu 2018). In this process, “trainees” are also awakened to the empowering nature of Chinese law that will protect them in marriage (Cui 2018; Liu and Bai 2019). As a state media report puts it, “Now, young women in Xinjiang can be sure that those who intend to harm them in the name of religion will be punished according to the law” (Cui 2018).

The benevolent patriarch is not necessarily Han Chinese. Some Uyghur officials also contribute to establishing this patriarchal hierarchy. Shewket Imin, a high-ranking Uyghur cadre, deplors women wearing jilbab:

We Uyghurs also do not wish to see women wearing this kind of clothes. ... Not that those women wearing jilbabs themselves are aggressive. Most of them are very innocent. It was the religious forces around them who forced them to dress like this. ... They unwittingly became walking extremist religious symbols because of what they wear. (*Global Times* 2015)

In official Chinese narratives, the state savior transforms “Xinjiang women” from “shy” girls into “independent modern” women (Liu and Xie 2019), from passive subjects of their husbands to women with “total control” of their lives (Cui 2018). Following this transformation, the female “trainees” are described as having “gained self-respect,” found “renewed value in life” (Liu 2018a), and become more competitive and with higher demands from life (Fan and Liu 2018). This path to transformation, and the binary on

which it is based, are conveyed visually in the series of short films *Embracing a New Life*, where the darkness of an “extremist” life in black and white is replaced, following the “training,” with a colorful and musically animated new beginning under the auspices of the state (Yixiaocuo 2019).

Chinese counterterrorism narratives thus depict the state as giving ethnic minorities “a stronger sense of security and happiness” (Hassan 2019), earning their gratitude. Now saved from themselves, Uyghur women praise the benevolent patriarch and the “vocational education and training centers” (Wubuli 2019):

If I had not gone to the center to receive education, I might have fallen further into the quagmire of extremism and might have been imprisoned for having done unlawful things. (Liu 2018a)

Without the care and help from the Party and government I wouldn't have achieved so much. (*China Daily* 2020b)

Official Chinese narratives represent state “training” as a transformative experience even for women who, following their re-education, continue to stay at home. The difference is that now they do it not because men tell them to, but because of their choice to “take care of the family” (Liu 2018a). Staying at home is no longer a symptom of “extremism,” but a sign that “mothers play a crucial role in their families,” says Li Fang, director of the women’s association in Xinjiang (Liu 2018a). The Chinese state continues to take care of women who choose to stay at home by offering evening schools to learn Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese), providing residential community centers, and/or establishing local women’s associations as new secular social spaces (Liu 2018a). The CCP is painted as a benevolent patriarch that rescue “Xinjiang women” from “religious extremism.” As Cui puts it, “the minds of Uygur [sic] women were emancipated” during “the process of eradicating extremism” (Cui 2021).

A new agentic life: modernity and “she power”

Saved from the clutches of “extremism” by the Chinese state, “Xinjiang women” can look forward to a new agentic life, according to the official discourse. This is, as one Chinese scholar puts it, the “modern and realistic life” that those “influenced by extremism” reject (Liu 2018b).

A core marker of this promised agency is a new dress code that reveals what is portrayed as the natural beauty of “Xinjiang women.” Fashion is an emblem of modernity and tradition at the same time. “When people think about Uyghurs [sic], the image of a beautiful young girl ... may well spring to mind,” a Chinese journalist says (Cui 2015), reproducing common stereotypes of female ethnic minorities. Xinjiang is changing with China and the world, and “the change in society is reflected in local fashion trends,” an

Uyghur man tells the state media (Cui 2015). In a feature titled “100 Years of Uyghur Beauty in 2 Minutes,” the modern Uyghur woman is framed as part of a genealogy of beauty that sees a turning point in the 1940s, when “Xinjiang women began to wear shorter, tighter, and more casual dresses” (Xinhua 2017a). The piece continues:

At the dawn of the new century, Uygur [sic] women became more open and began to embrace bolder fashion. Leggings, tight dresses and sleeveless blouses were popular among them. Today, as Uygur [sic] women open their eyes, parties and banquets in Xinjiang welcome more Uygur [sic] female guests. Evening gowns are must-haves for female party goers. (Xinhua 2017a)

The Chinese state thus articulates the agency of “trained” “Xinjiang women” as a matter of giving full expression to their beauty, as a result of which they can now let go of their previous suffering under “extremism,” as a former “trainee” interviewed by the *Global Times* seems to suggest: “It is painful for women to cover our beauty. ... [W]hy should we do this?” (Liu 2018a).

Other signifiers of the new modern agency assumed by female “trainees” are their jobs and salaries. Once the formerly “extremist” “Xinjiang women” have been “trained” by the state, it is their time to “find jobs and make money” (Liu 2018a). Transformed and with the economic help of the government (*China Daily* 2020b), they are invited to “become an important force in promoting economic and social development” (Liu 2018b). The standard of modern professional agency that the Chinese government attempts to impose on ethnic minorities is captured in a journalist’s description of a Uyghur woman: “Perfectly made-up, immaculately groomed and speaking fluent Chinese, she looks like a textbook example of a white-collar professional” (Shao 2012).

As modern professionals, “trained” “Xinjiang women” in the official Chinese narratives are often defined by their salary, suggesting that they have been rehabilitated as “neoliberal selves” (Yixiaocuo 2019). The salaries, ranging from 1,500 yuan to 6,000 yuan a month, with an increase of 2,000 yuan before attending the “vocational education and training center,” or at a rate of 4,000 yuan per square meter of handmade silk rug, are depicted as symbolizing the newly gained confidence of the former “trainees” (*China Daily* 2020b; Liu 2018a; Xinhua 2017b). Now, as “competitive” individuals, they will be “dissatisfied with themselves” if their salary does not meet expectations (Fan and Liu 2018). Dress code expectations can be met with their newly acquired financial freedom; the director of the women’s association in Xinjiang emphasizes that the “trainees” “can use the money they have earned to buy the clothes they like” (Fan and Liu 2018). In official Chinese discourse, deradicalization is the road to a salary, which, in turn, opens up the possibility of unveiling the natural beauty of modern “Xinjiang women.” As such, they will be recognizable by “fashion accessories” such as “black

boots, a high bun, lipstick and shiny bracelets on both wrists" (Lin 2011). For those women rescued by the state, there should be no sign of "the puritan, restrictive dress that is a must for Muslim women in some Middle Eastern countries" (Lin 2011). It seems as if, as pushed for by the local Xinjiang authorities in 2011, a "civilized healthy lifestyle" has diluted "religious consciousness" through fashion and money (Lin 2011).

The state promise of a new agency also has spatial consequences that promote the "modern" Chinese metropolis over the "backward" rural south of Xinjiang. In the official discourse, the metropolis emerges as the place where female "youth" can be extended and "trained" "Xinjiang women" can avoid the fate of soon being "bound to the family and children" with what is represented as "little consideration for themselves" (Liu 2018a). The metropolis embodies a new location away from southern rural Xinjiang, a place "plagued with extremism" (Liu 2018b) where people "wear veils" (Lin 2011) – a place where, as a "Muslim" belly dancer interviewed by the state media indicates, people "believe that belly dancers are prostitutes" (Penêda 2012). This is in contrast with the capital, Beijing, to which people "come for the entertainment and beauty of dance" (Penêda 2012). Modern Xinjiang is situated as closer to the Chinese capital. This state-sanctioned Xinjiang is "thirsty for development," according to an urban Uyghur female entrepreneur whose "experience outside Xinjiang" opened her eyes (Cui 2020). This Xinjiang is, as another Uyghur woman claims, "similar to other metropolises in China" (*China Daily* 2020a). Another Uyghur woman, from rural Khotan, comments, "I did not know the world was so big and wonderful until I visited Beijing" (*Xinhua* 2018). A modern metropolitan Xinjiang thus emerges in official narratives as the right place for the "trained" "Xinjiang woman."

Other features characterize the agency that the Chinese state has reserved for Uyghur women. Some are related to their reproductive potential. Xinjiang, Chinese officials claim, now reflects a "modern population growth type featuring low birth rate" (*China Daily* 2020c). As such, a "Xinjiang woman" can accordingly exercise the "right to decide to have herself sterilized after having one child," in what constitutes "a great achievement promoted by [the] Chinese government in the protection of women's rights and interests" (Xinjiang University 2020). As the Chinese Embassy in the United States celebrates, Uyghur women are "no longer baby-making machines" (Ordóñez 2021).

In fixing a new agency for "Xinjiang women," the Chinese state promises ready-made "life-changing, empowering experiences." As Yixiaocuo (2019) suggests, this call to "embrace a new life," as expressed in a film featuring female "extremists" rehabilitated as agentic women, is reminiscent of "the rhetoric of 'saving Muslim women,' borrowed from the American 'War on Terror' playbook."

Conclusion

We have argued that the Chinese government's discourse around the PWOt has constructed "terrorism" through a gendered hierarchy in which Turkic Muslim women are understood in terms of a "traditional"/"extremist" binary. Our analysis has illustrated how this hierarchy, ostensibly in the interests of "liberating women," produces and sustains Uyghur women as passive subjects. Drawing on the literature on women and violence, and on critiques of the GWOt, we have highlighted the parallels between the two campaigns, in which the slogans of "women's liberation" or "gender equality" paradoxically only serve to reinforce the existing gendered hierarchy. Noting the differences between the liberal West and socialist China, we have underlined that the political/personal divide must be considered in the context of China's socialist roots, which implies dissolved boundaries between the personal and the political, a pattern already seen in contemporary Chinese history. The effects of women's liberation projects in Xinjiang confirm that, despite the official claims, these projects are far from the emancipatory force implicit in the slogan "The personal is political" (Hanisch 1969).

Through a self-reflective approach to agency, we have highlighted the counterproductive nature of projects allegedly aimed at women's liberation. This counterproductivity is caused, as demonstrated in this article, by state control over the ascription of women's agency. In the state imagination, the ideal Turkic Muslim woman is a smiling, beautiful, colorful, keen-to-work, modern, legitimate subject who believes in the Chinese dream, in contrast to a "backward," superstitious, helpless, agentless subject in need of rescue by the state. This discursive construction, which ignores the complexity of Uyghur women's religious and socio-cultural practices in Xinjiang (see Huang 2009; Tynen 2019), is consistent with the way in which "iron girls" were portrayed during the Cultural Revolution.

In this binary, which demonizes the state-imagined "extremist" other and ascribes agency to those who do not necessarily seek representation, Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim women – officially known as "Xinjiang women" – are reduced to sexist silhouettes, "hollow ... representations of femininity that became dominant" (Shepherd 2006, 24). Such portrayals function only to counteract those created by the so-called "extremist" gender norms, and represent a state-endorsed divergence from the "traditional" Uyghur culture. In doing so, official Chinese narratives have only replaced one patriarchal hierarchy with another, imposing an exoticizing and sexist gaze. In enacting the "traditional"/"extremist" binary, the agency of these women and its meaning, when not denied or assumed, are concealed.

In the gendered hierarchy of the PWOt, Uyghur women are, first, fixed as passive subjects immersed in the darkness of "backwardness" and superstition; second, securitized as a pathological anomaly jeopardizing the public

security and stability of the Chinese nation; and third, re-imagined as smiling, beautiful, colorful, keen-to-work, healthy, modern, legitimate subjects who believe in the Chinese dream. In this process, the women are articulated as passive agents. First, they are portrayed as ignorant puppets of agentic “extremist” males (cf. Auchter 2012), then as helpless subjects in need of rescue by the Chinese state as male savior, and finally as rehabilitated bodies to which to ascribe a new transformative agency that speaks of emancipation through beauty and modernity according to the CCP’s “she-power” standard. In China’s PWoT, as in the GWoT, Turkic Muslim women remain “suspended in an unceasing, silent victimhood” (Allison 2013, 320) that continues to suppress their agency, despite claims by the Chinese state to the contrary. The Chinese state project of promoting “she power” (Li and Chen 2015) is thus, at best, counterproductive and, at worst, an asphyxiating act that denies identity and agency to Turkic Muslim ethnic-minority women.

Disclaimer

The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the University of St Andrews, the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, the Ministry of Defence, or any other United Kingdom government agency.

Notes

1. According to official Chinese figures from 2021, the population of the Uyghur ethnic minority is 11.62 million, accounting for 44.96 percent of the total permanent population in Xinjiang.
2. This study considers all Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities (Uyghur, Kazakh, and so on) in Xinjiang, but it does not distinguish between Uyghurs and Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities.
3. This is an official term used by the Chinese government.

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