An Analysis of China’s Muslim-Related Policies from the Perspectives of Ethnic Heterogeneity, Sinicization and “Anxiety Management”

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ABSTRACT: As an officially atheist country led by the Communist Party, China is often regarded as a nation where citizens’ freedom of religion is infringed. Despite its status as one of the five officially recognized religions in China, Islam is regarded extremely vulnerable in front of the state, as is shown by the country’s controversial policies towards its Uyghur Muslims. It is even common to hear scholars, politicians, and media labeling China as “anti-Islam.” Most research simply regards China’s Muslim-related policies as unitary, ignoring the diversity of China’s Muslim communities and the basic logics behind these policies. This article will analyze China’s Muslim-related policies based on the actual situation of ethnic heterogeneity (mainly the Hui and Uyghurs) and the central principles of Sinicization and promoting ethnic harmony. It will argue that China’s Muslim-related policies may sometimes seem like hasty “anxiety management” and may appear objectionable from a Western-liberal perspective, but they are not ill-intended and cannot simply be dichotomized as “anti-Islam.”

Key words: Islam in China, Chinese politics, Hui Muslims, Uyghur Muslims, ethnic issues

INTRODUCTION

China is a multi-ethnic nation with a broad territory. According to the Chinese government, there are 56 officially recognized ethnic groups in China. It is also worth noting that the major Han ethnic group accounts for more than 90% of China’s total population (91.1%), while among the other 55 ethnic minorities, Zhuang is the only group that accounts for more than 1% of China’s population (NBSC 2021). Although, since the establishment of the PRC, the Chinese government has been trying hard to foster a zhonghua minzu (Chinese nationality) identity transcending ethnic divisions (Collins and Cottey 2012, 125–6), not all ethnic groups fully comply with that, especially those “(who) are so distinctive . . . religiously . . . that they may seek political expression outside the official bounds of multiculturalism” (Collins and Cottey 2012, 129). This inference is reasonable, as the regime in China since 1949 has been led by a Marxist-Leninist Communist Party which essentially embraces atheism and regards any religious groups capable of ideologically mobilizing a large number of people as an imminent threat to its political dominance, while the majority of ethnic rebellions against Chinese rule in the past 70 years were organized by Tibetans and Uyghurs who are mostly religious (and also linguistically and even racially different from Han people). Since the 11 September attack in New York, many (Western) countries have tightened control of their domestic Muslim communities; they also started to adopt the so-called “securitization” method when dealing with the increasing number of Muslim migrants and refugees, which unavoidably fuels Islamophobia on their soil. By contrast, when countries like Russia, India, Myanmar, and China introduced their own policies towards Muslims, Western countries usually did not hesitate to take the
moral high ground by responding to these issues as “human rights infringement,” “anti-Islam,” or even “genocide.” Against this background, it is important that we analyze China’s Muslim-related policies from the perspectives of ethnic heterogeneity and policy logics to see if China is “anti-Islam.”

In fact, Islam has a long history in China. Based on the manuscripts of Chinese Muslims, Islam was first brought to China by Sa’d ibn abî Waqqâs in the 620s when the first mosque in China was built in Canton. Although modern secular scholars cannot prove that Sa’d ibn abî Waqqâs actually visited China, they agree that Muslims must have arrived in China within the 7th century and received warm welcome from the Tang Emperor (Lipman 1998). In the following dynasties, Chinese Muslims experienced integration and persecution. While many of them proclaimed their loyalty to the central empire, they also carried out revolts many times. During the ROC (Republic of China) era after the collapse of China’s imperial rule, the nationalist republic endorsed the principle of wuzu gonghe (Five Races under One Union), when “Hui” was recognized as one of the five official races (ethnic groups) which stood for all Muslims in China at that time. After the founding of the PRC, Islam was also recognized as one of the five officially acknowledged religions in the People’s Republic. It is estimated that there are currently around 25 million Muslims in China, amounting to a little less than 2% of the country’s population of 1.4 billion. Ten ethnic groups in China are predominantly Muslim, among which the Uyghur and Hui people are the largest groups, both having a population of more than 11 million and jointly making up around 90% of China’s Muslim population. Other Muslim minorities include Kazak, Dongxiang, Kyrgyz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bonan, and Tatar (NBSC 2013).

Academic literature about China’s Muslims and China’s Muslim-related policies are not lacking, but (foreign) scholars usually prefer to focus on the conflicts between Muslim ethnic groups and the state and Han people, and it is not difficult to discern that more emphasis is put on Uyghur Muslims (Hyer 2006). Research about Muslim minorities’ positive contribution to China’s development also exists but is a marginalized topic (Ho 2013). Ethnic and religious issues are considered comparatively sensitive in China, but some Chinese scholars have written about Islam and Muslims in China from historical, ideological and anthropological perspectives (Lai 2019). Since 2016, the majority of literature about China’s Muslim-related policies has been negative and further focusing on Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.

This article will talk about China’s policies towards its Muslim minorities. Focusing on the Hui and Uyghurs, it aims to establish how China responds differently to different Muslim ethnic groups. It will also use cases to explore the basic principles (Sinicization, supplemented by de-radicalization and ethnic harmony) and usual method (hasty anxiety management) behind China’s Muslim-related policies, in order to help readers understand the heterogeneity of Muslims in China and that China’s policies towards Muslims are not unitary, static, and cannot be dichotomized as “anti-Islam,” thus Western countries’ allegations are not well-grounded.

**CHINA’S RELATIONS WITH THE HUI AND UYGHURS**

To better understand China’s policies towards its Muslim minorities, it is important to look at two ethnic groups in particular, the Hui and Uyghurs, which have similar populations and together account for about 90% of China’s Muslim population. In spite of the same religion being shared by the two groups, the Hui and Uyghurs are different in many ways. Because of that, the Chinese government imposed different policies towards them, but with the same focus—Sinicization.
History and Basic Situations of the Hui and Uyghurs

Despite variation in the degree of acculturation, the people today classified as Hui are basically Chinese practitioners of Islam. Having always been surrounded by hegemonic Chinese culture and subject to non-Muslim rule, the Hui people represent a remarkable adaptation of Islam to Chinese characteristics (Gladney 1996). Over the first 1,000 years after arriving in China from the Middle East and Central Asia, most Muslims in China lost their vernacular languages because it was difficult to keep in contact with their regions of origin. Gradually, their ethnic traits were also lost because these Muslims intermarried with Han people. It is also worth mentioning that, long before these Muslims were officially classified as Hui, their Islamic ideology also acculturated to Chinese culture, thus making them Sino-Muslims. An obvious example of their Sinicization was a collection of writings from the 18th century called the Han Kitab. A significant part of Han Kitab portrays Islam as compatible with Confucian principles of social order and political doctrine. The most famous writer of the Han Kitab, Liu Zhi, accentuated allegiance to Confucian hierarchy, including loyalty to the Emperor, while deemphasizing notions that might have challenged Confucian hierarchy and loyalty, such as jihad or allegiance to the ummah (Lipman 1998). Later on, influenced by its writings, Xidaotang, a Sino-Islamic religious sect was founded in 1901, which fuses traditional Sunni Hanafi Islam with the study of Confucius classics and the Han Kitab (Lai 2019). The Hui’s forebears include a long line of military generals loyal to imperial Chinese governments. There were instances of Hui disloyalty in history as well, for example, the Hui rebels who battled the late Qing dynasty from a base in Ningxia (Beech 2014), the Hui uprisings and their suppression during the ROC period, and the attempt to establish a Muslim emirate in 1958 (Israeli 2002).

In the ROC era, the nationality/race “Hui” denoted all Muslims in China despite their ethnicities. But in the 1950s, the newly founded People’s Republic broke that barrier by classifying Hui as one of its 55 ethnic minorities along with other ethnic groups like Tibetans and Uyghurs, which deemphasized their religious (Islamic) identity but added an ethnic layer to their identity, despite the fact that they are ethnically indistinguishable from China’s Han majority, as some scholars put it: “it is only the presence of a white prayer cap that differentiates a Hui man from his Han counterpart” (Beech 2014). According to the 2010 census, the Hui was still the largest Muslim group in China at that time, and they scattered around all parts of China. The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, a provincial-level administrative division established in 1958, is an autonomous Muslim region for Hui people, but the region is currently predominantly Han (64%), despite the fact that Hui Muslims are the majority in several cities and counties in that region.

If Hui can be depicted as Sino-Muslims, then the history and current situations of Uyghur people tell a very different story. The Uyghurs have traditionally inhabited a series of oases scattered across the Taklamakan Desert which historically existed as independent states or were controlled by many civilizations including China, the Mongols, the Tibetans, and various Turkic polities. The Uyghurs started to become Islamized in the 10th century and most of them were identified as Muslims in the 16th century. Many of these Muslims came under the rule of the Chinese empire with the expansion of Qing Dynasty in the 18th century (Friedrichs 2017, 12) in the Dzungar-Qing War, after which the two regions of Dzungar were reorganized into a province named Xinjiang, meaning “New Territory”. In fact, the appearance of the name “Uyghur” came even later, and many names had been used to refer to Muslims living in Xinjiang (such as Sarts and Chantou) before the name “Uyghur” was finally adopted in 1921 based on a conference held in Tashkent attended by Muslims from the Tarim Basin (Dwyer 2010, 75). Compared to Hui’s comparative obedience to Chinese rule, Uyghurs’ disloyalty and
rebellion are taken for granted, because unlike most Hui rebellions which represented local power struggles rather than collision with central authority (Lipman 1998), Uyghur insurgencies against Chinese rule were more radical, which was often reflected in their ethno-religious characteristics. In the late Qing Dynasty, the riots led by Yaqub Beg had Islamic and jihadist elements, as Yaqub Beg gave himself the title of “pasha” and brutally imposed a very strict version of Islamic Sharia Law on his territories. In the ROC period, the Turkic Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan (TIRET) and East Turkestan Republic (ETR) were established in the 1930s and 1940s respectively, aiming at “liberating” the rest of Xinjiang from Chinese rule. In 1950, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) captured the territories of ETR and the whole region became part of the newly established Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

According to the statistics of the latest national census in China, the Uyghurs surpassed the Man people and Hui people and became the third largest ethnic group and biggest Muslim group in China (NBSC 2021). But unlike the Hui who are scattered around China, more than 90% of Uyghurs still live in XUAR and remain the largest ethnic group (46%) in the region. Although XUAR’s capital city Urumqi is predominately Han (73%), most parts of Southern Xinjiang are still predominantly populated by Uyghurs, such as Hotan (89%) and Kashgar (84%). The Uyghurs have jealously guarded their linguistic and cultural traits of distinction from Han people, like other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang such as the Kazaks and the Kirgiz. Uyghur rebellions continued after the establishment of the PRC, and many of them turned out to be violent or had Islamist terrorist elements, such as the 2009 Urumqi riots (with 197 deaths), and a wave of Uyghur-led terrorist attacks from 2012 to 2015 taking the forms of knife attacks, suicide bombers, car crashes, and explosives, which caused hundreds of deaths.

State-Hui and State-Uyghur Policies

Some scholars portray China’s policies towards domestic Muslims as in line with the so-called “socio-spatial hierarchy”, where the old mentality of yi yizhi yi (using barbarians to control barbarians) still reflects China’s different policies towards different Muslim minority groups, especially the Hui and Uyghurs (Friedrichs 2017, 16). Indeed, as we will see, the balance of China’s preferential policies and negative sanctions towards Muslims clearly favors the Hui community, which are considered more Sinicized and obedient to central authority.

In terms of Beijing’s national policy regarding Islam, the government tries to place all Islamic activities under the umbrella of an official state-directed body, the China Islamic Association, whose duties include to “support the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership,” “adapt Islam to socialist society,” “hold high the banner of patriotism, unity, and progress,” “refute the fallacies of religious extremism,” and “train Islamic teaching personnel.” It is also in charge of organizing hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). Apart from that, every aspirant imam in China also needs to pass exams or interviews conducted by the Islamic Association and later remains subject to the authority of the association to avoid the incidence of “illegal religious activities” (Friedrichs 2017, 16–17). If this is regarded as some sort of state control over Muslims, preferential policies towards them are also not lacking. For example, Muslim minorities like the Hui and Uyghurs were exempt from the strict “Family Planning” (One-Child) Policy, so their population size rose much faster than that of Han people. They could also get bonus points in the National College Entrance Examination (gaokao) and benefit from ethnic minority quotas for employment in the public sector. Besides, halal canteens and dining areas were established in most Chinese universities, not only to provide both Muslim and non-Muslim students with halal food, but also to avoid the mixture of cutlery serving halal and haram food which may be objected to by some Muslim students.
Under the framework of China’s overall Muslim policy, the difference in policies towards the Hui and Uyghurs is worth noting. Some claim that the friendly attitude of Chinese government towards the Hui is in line with the imperial tradition of seeing the Hui as affiliates of the Han (Hua) rather than as barbarians (Yi) (Cooke 2008). In other words, the Hui are more Sinicized, as they speak Chinese Mandarin, live closer or even together with Han people, and look just like them. Although Han-Hui relations are not universally harmonious as violent clashes sometimes happened, these usually were controlled at the local level, reflecting local power struggles, instead of opposing central rule. Even if their dissatisfaction could sometimes be expressed at the national level, it was still constrained without crossing the red line. For example, during the Tian’anmen protests in 1989, Hui Muslims were rallying against a book titled Sexual Customs which denigrated Islamic sexual mores. Despite shouting “Allahu Akbar,” Hui Muslims also waved banners proclaiming “Uphold the Constitution” and “Love our Country and Religion”—and the government responded by outlawing the controversial book (Gladney 1994). As for the state’s more specific policies, many privileges are granted to the Hui people. For example, new mosques can be built even in small communities, religious publications and cultural artefacts are relatively free, and girls-only Muslim institutions are sometimes allowed (Ma 2012). The state even tolerated mosque-affiliated nurseries and schools where Arabic and the Quran are at the center of their curriculum. Interviews conducted in 2014 in Ningxia witnessed the Hui people openly practicing their faith, such as fasting during Ramadan, and Hui women were starting to wear veils more (Beech 2014). In the economic domain, Hui people are also given many freedoms. For example, in 2009, a pilot scheme of Islamic banking was initiated in Ningxia, and two years later, a bank in Gansu Province even introduced a Muslim credit card called “Crescent and Star Card.”. The classical Muslim endowment of waqf was revitalized in the 1980s, although it faced restrictions from the 1990s. Moreover, the Hui people are sometimes regarded as consultants for trade between China and Muslim countries, and they are allowed to engage actively in business and international trade regarding halal food and other products popular in Muslim countries.

As for the Uyghurs, as mentioned before, they are regarded as less Sinicized and are at the periphery of Chinese culture and Chinese rule. This is mainly because Uyghurs care more about their own identity, either ethnically, linguistically, or religiously. For instance, until mid-2000s, most Uyghurs still sent their offspring to schools where courses were taught in the Uyghur language even though Mandarin education was given strong importance and many privileges, and Uyghurs attending schools in Mandarin (minkanhan) sometimes suffered from both resentment in the Uyghur community and discrimination in the Han society (Taynen 2006). As a result, statistics in 2006 reported that 82% of Uyghurs over 15 were still unable to read Chinese and 10.8% can only “read Chinese with difficulty,” denoting a huge barrier with the rest of the country (Grose 2010). Besides, the Uyghurs also prefer to live in self-isolation, as they are mainly inhabited in XUAR, especially Southern Xinjiang. This is reinforced by the fact that cross-ethnic intermarriages in the Uyghur community are really rare, as statistics show that 99.47% of Uyghurs married fellow Uyghurs, so they are even more endogamous than the predominant Han people (98.55%) and much more endogamous than Hui Muslims (87.06%). And in Xinjiang, an ethnically diverse autonomous region, the rate of bi-ethnic household registrations (hukou) is just 1.37%, which is even lower and just little bit more than half of the nationwide level of 2.69% (Friedrichs 2017, 37–9), despite the central government’s policy to stimulate Han migration to Xinjiang. If the aforementioned factors were just limited to the level of social preferences among Uyghur Muslims which did not cross the boundary with politics, then the issue would be easier to solve. But in reality, there have been Uyghur-led violent riots over the years, taking the forms of raiding local government, police stations, and in many cases terrorist attacks by killing innocent citizens with
knifes, cars, and suicide bombers, sometimes influenced by international Islamist militant groups as assailants waved black jihadist flags. These activities clearly threatened China’s national security, and the potential backing by other global anti-CPC movements added a more complicated and sensitive political layer to the issue. Despite the fact that Uyghur dissidents, rioters, and terrorists are in the minority, as the state always officially put it, many normal Chinese citizens would still regard Xinjiang as a highly insecure and unstable region and would have felt fearful of Uyghur people before 2016.

Considering all the factors above, the state’s policies towards the Uyghurs have always been tougher than their more Sinicized Muslim counterparts, and the policies witnessed a new round of tightening from 2016 when Chen Quanguo was elected Party Secretary of Xinjiang from Tibet after a high volume of Uyghur-led terror shocked the country with hundreds of deaths. The Chinese government saw these activities as the result of Islamic extremism, thus regarding “de-radicalisation” as the best way to deal with the issue. There are many restrictions specific to the region of Xinjiang and its Uyghur people, for example, the call to prayer (adhan) must not be transmitted by loudspeakers, and Uyghur students must not be caught performing daily prayers or wearing religious garb. The Chinese government has also been reluctant to issue passports to Uyghurs seeking permission to study abroad to prevent them from being exposed to extreme nationalist or Islamist ideas (Finley 2013). As mentioned before, in recent years, the Hui community saw a revival of Islamic culture as people openly expressed their faith. In Xinjiang, however, reports in 2014 (even before Chen took office) showed that residents with long beards were not allowed to board public buses in some cities. In Kashgar, the local government even promoted a campaign called Project Beauty that urged Uyghur women to “show their pretty faces and let their beautiful hair fly in the wind” (Beech 2014). In the official annual pilgrimage organized by the China Islamic Association, the Hui people from Ningxia are between four and five times as likely to be on a hajj delegation to Mecca as Uyghurs from Xinjiang (Friedrichs 2017, 19). All of these “discriminatory” policies towards Uyghurs have been strengthened since 2016, when over a million Uyghur Muslims were allegedly sent to vocational training and re-education centres in order to “help them better adhere to the Chinese society” by taking Mandarin classes, learning Chinese laws, and getting equipped with vocational skills. As information is difficult to gain and prove, it is possible that these trainings may involve activities challenging their Islamic belief. While these restrictive policies appear objectionable from a Western-liberal perspective, Chinese authorities have reason to be on their guard because even scholars sympathetic to Uyghur grievances acknowledge a palpable element of ethno-religious radicalism in Xinjiang in the 2010s (Finley 2013). It is also worth mentioning that the governments of most Muslim countries usually did not oppose or even publicly supported China’s actions in Xinjiang, and many of these in fact are the USA’s close allies rather than simply being “bribed” by China’s economic hegemony.

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES AND METHOD BEHIND CHINA’S MUSLIM-RELATED POLICIES

Based on the analyses above, some may draw the conclusion that China’s policy towards Muslims is only based on ethnic differentiation, because the state simply prefers the Hui people and dislikes the Uyghurs. Although this opinion acknowledges the Muslim heterogeneity in China, it also omits one of the central aims behind China’s Muslim-related policies—Sinicization, which means its policies towards one specific ethnic group are not static and are subject to tightening as well if it perceives any de-Sinicization inclination. As for the case of the Hui people, despite enjoying comparatively loose policies from the government in history, they have faced stricter
control in the past few years. One of the reasons behind that is the proliferation of external influence among the Hui community, which walks against Sinicization. To be more specific, with the spread of social media, the idea of one Islamic world and also the easier access of travel to Islamic countries, many Hui people started to emphasize their Muslim identity more and expressed their willingness to lead their lives closer to fellow Muslims in the Middle East, which was shown by the construction of a large number of mosques in Ningxia with Middle Eastern-style domes instead of traditional Chinese style. The region also displayed an inclination to gradual Arabization, as some cities in Ningxia added Arabic to their street signs, which had never happened in history. These activities against Sinicization caused a backlash from the Han community in other regions and the state decided to get involved by introducing Islamic and Arabic-related restrictions and bans in the region to bring the Hui community back to the path of Sinicization.

When discussing China's Islam-related policies, it is also important to remember that China is a multi-ethnic nation with 56 ethnic groups, and only less than 2% of its population believe in Islam. But still, the sheer number of Muslims in China is very large, which even surpasses the total population of some Muslim countries. Thus, for the state, its Muslim-related policy must be cautious so as to maintain a good balance between Muslims and non-Muslims, in order not to offend the majority of its non-Muslim ethnic groups (mainly Han) who embrace secularism, and also not to offend its Muslim community, which constitutes a large population and may have the potential for uprisings if they feel offended. This logic of fostering ethnic harmony and avoiding offending each other was reflected in some Muslim-related policies. As we can see, it is in no way ill-intended, but when implemented, combined with Chinese government’s abrupt shifts in regulations and policies sometimes, it could appear a kind of irrational or even naive “anxiety management” which would potentially backfire in reality.

The Chinese government has always been cautious about its rhetoric regarding Islam, because the state experienced bitter uprisings led by its domestic Muslims in history. In order to further pacify its Muslim community, the government sometimes took preemptive measures that they thought could promote ethnic harmony. As mentioned before, during the 1989 Tian'anmen protests, the government responded actively to the Hui people's protests by outlawing a book that contained slander on Muslim's sexual mores, which can be regarded as rational decision. But some precautionary measures taken by the state to avoid Muslims' anger were a bit absurd. For example, pork is regarded unclean by Muslims, at the same time, pig is one of the 12 signs of Chinese zodiac, and the Year of the Pig is celebrated every 12 years. Up until now, many older-generation non-Muslims in China still mistakenly think that the reason why Muslims do not eat pork is that pig is their god, which is seen as blasphemy within the Muslim community. In 1995 (Year of the Pig), some newspapers in China published a mocking tale in which a pig saves the life of prophet Muhammad, and it aroused anger within the Hui and Uyghur groups. In 2007, the next Year of the Pig, just several weeks before the Chinese New Year, the China Central Television (CCTV) which holds the annual Spring Festival Gala that attracts more than a billion viewers every year suddenly released a notice saying “to show respect to Islam, and upon guidance from higher levels of the government, CCTV will keep any ‘pig’ images off the TV screen.” This not only led to the removing of any pig element in the Gala, but also the removing of pigs in commercial ads wishing Chines people “Happy the Year of the Pig” from corporations like Nestlé and Coca Cola. Advertising-industry executives said senior Communist Party leaders had told CCTV, the only national monopoly TV broadcasting network and CPC’s “mouthpiece,” that references to pigs should be avoided to prevent conflicts among ethnic groups, thus it transmitted the state’s official concern (WSJ 2007). In 2019, the most recent Year of the Pig, the same situation happened in CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala, where elements and mentioning of pigs were banned. This time, Chinese
netizens took to the social networking site Weibo using hashtag “no pig in the Year of Pig” to show their confusion and complaints, but the hashtag was later censored and removed by the authorities, resulting in many Islamophobic and insulting comments on Weibo from Han people, which further fueled tensions between ethnic groups. As we can see, the Chinese government sometimes does not fully understand Islam and mistakenly thinks “pig” is a total taboo in Islamic culture. By introducing pig censorship in the Year of the Pig in a hasty manner, thinking that this precautionary measure could pacify the Muslim community and promote ethnic harmony, it actually offended the majority Han people and deepened their misunderstanding of Islamic culture and Muslim minorities.

Another example of China’s “anxiety management” of Muslim-related issues concerns the halal industry. Since the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was introduced, China has been willing to strengthen its relations with Muslim countries in the Middle East and sees the halal food industry as a medium to achieve that. In Ningxia, the halal food industry gained revenue reaching 700 million USD a year by 2010 (Gonul and Rogenhofer 2018). The government saw the potential of turning the region into a halal food production and export hub, so it introduced policies to encourage the industry, even thinking about establishing national halal food standardization regulations. However, these policies were finally halted, because over the past ten years, a controversial trend of “halalification” was witnessed in China, when the “halal” symbol was used excessively on irrelevant products such as water, salt, and toothpaste. In addition, some Muslim communities even took advantage of this period and promoted the “halalification” and Arabization in other domains, establishing Muslim-exclusive public libraries and even hospital wards. This aroused anxiety and even anger from the non-Muslim (mainly Han) community, as they thought this trend was pushing the country to segregation, radicalization, and was challenging the principle of secularism. The state sensed the dissatisfaction from the Han community, and the “halalification” in some regions coincided with a wave of Islamist attacks in the country. Thus, the state felt it imperative to pacify the Han community and to start a nation-wide de-radicalization campaign. To achieve that, many regional governments demanded halal restaurants and food stores to get rid of any elements which go against Sinicization and could trigger radicalization, and they think Arabic words and the shape of dome fall under the scope of these elements. In a short time, one could see halal restaurants in Beijing, Shandong Province, and other regions replacing their “حلال” (halal) or “المطعم الإسلامي” (Islamic restaurant) signs with Chinese characters of “清真” (halal). It seems that just shading the original Arabic letters with a cloth or painting over them could meet the authorities’ requirements. Although it is not clear if these hasty measures would pacify the Han community and effectively reach the goal of de-radicalization—the author once saw a halal restaurant in Beijing with Chinese signboard writing shaliya canting (Islamic Sharia Law Restaurant) operate without being censored—it would undoubtedly cause confusion and even anger within the Muslim communities, fearing that the government is trying to erase their identity.

CONCLUSION

Western countries are extremely interested in discussing China’s regime legitimacy and human rights issues. When the minorities in their own countries are suffering from deeply rooted discrimination and when they have been directly or indirectly getting involved in the persecution against other people, especially Muslims in the Middle East, they have tried to divert the global attention to China’s handling of its Muslim minority groups by standing on the moral high ground and labeling China as “anti-Islam” to denigrate China and instigate anger among their own citizens and Muslims in other countries they themselves historically persecuted.
As this article has shown, despite being an officially atheist nation, China’s actions towards its Muslim communities cannot be dichotomized as “anti-Islam.” This is because, when evaluating China’s Muslim-related policies, the actual situation of ethnic heterogeneity and central aim of Sinicization should not be ignored. The state has imposed different policies towards different Muslim ethnic groups based on their varying level of Sinicization throughout history, as it is the case for the Hui and Uyghur Muslims, where the former basically enjoy a higher level of freedom of religion than the latter since they are regarded more Sinicized and more obedient to central rule, although both actually benefitted from preferential policies such as One Child Policy exemption. The fact that China is a multi-ethnic nation which is mainly atheist but hosts more than 20 million Islam practitioners should not be forgotten as well, as this leads to China’s aim of promoting ethnic harmony to avoid offending each side when it considers its Muslim-related policies. However, despite its good intentions, because of the government’s lack of knowledge, immature policy-making, and sometimes iron-fisted or one-size-fits-all way of policy implementation, some of its Muslim-related policies have turned out to be hasty or even naive, which could even go against its original goal of promoting ethnic harmony, as it caused confusion and anger among those offended or negatively affected by the policies.

After understanding the situation of China’s Muslims and the logics behind China’s Muslim-related policies better, future researchers or policy-makers could explore combining the factors discussed in this article and think about ways to improve China’s Muslim-related policies and see how to seek a better balance between de-radicalization and human rights protection, freedom of religion, and CPC’s political leadership. Researchers could also conduct comparative studies of China and Western countries’ Muslim-related policies, or explore the relations between China’s Muslim-related policies and its foreign policies towards Muslim-dominated countries, especially against the background of its controversial de-radicalization campaign in Xinjiang and also the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative.

ENDNOTES

1 China released the core results of its 7th National Population Census (2020) in May 2021, as more detailed data is yet to be released, some of the statistics in this paper still came from the 6th National Census conducted in 2010.

2 This article was written in May 2021 and the population data used in the article were based on the national census of China conducted in 2010. The latest data of the 2020 national census were published in October 2021. One major change is that the population of Uyghurs surpassed two other ethnic groups in China, making it now the biggest Muslim group (no longer the second biggest Muslim group) and the third largest ethnic group (no longer the fifth largest ethnic group) in China. This has been noted in the text here but the other population statistics in the article have not been updated.

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