

BOOK REVIEWS

## Legitimacy of China's Counter-Terrorism Approach: The Mass Line Ethos

Chi Zhang. Singapore, Palgrave MacMillan, 2022. xvii + 132pp. £44.99 (hbk), ISBN 9789811931079

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The last several years has seen a spate of scholarly research on the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Much of this has focused, rightly, on causes and consequences of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) decisive shift toward repression, technologically enabled mass surveillance and ideological control as the core pillars of its governance of the region.

The mass internment of Uyghurs (and other Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities) in the region since 2016 in what Beijing calls “vocational education centres” (sometimes referred to as “re-education camps”) has been explained by some scholars as an expression of a settler colonial project to transform both the region and its non-Han Chinese peoples, while others have argued that this mass repression is consistent with processes of (cultural) genocide.

Much official Chinese rhetoric surrounding its repressive turn in Xinjiang, however, has explicitly defended and justified it as a necessary response to the threat of “Islamist” inspired terrorism by Uyghurs. And it is in this context that Chi Zhang's concise *Legitimacy of China's Counter-Terrorism Approach* contributes significantly to the field. She makes a persuasive case that external observers must come to grips with “China's rationale and mindset” (p. 1) on counter-terrorism, rather than simply dismiss it as post-facto justification for repression.

The core argument of the book is that China's discursive framing and practice of counter-terrorism demonstrates not only “the CCP's desire to maintain regime stability and state capacity in the face of perceived and real terrorist threats” but also illuminates “how the Chinese state functions through, and gains popular support from, the political discourse of friends and enemies” (p. 2). Given this focus, the author's approach to sources and methodology appropriately leans heavily toward interpretative analysis of primary source materials (e.g. official Chinese statements and documents), engagement with Chinese security and counter-terrorism experts in Beijing, Xi'an and Xinjiang, and triangulation of that material through critical engagement with existing non-Chinese scholarship on the issue (pp. 26–33).

The central engine, so to speak, of what the author sees as China's security and legitimacy-focused approach to counter-terrorism is the “mass line ethos,” one of Mao Zedong's theoretical and practical innovations in the development of the CCP's mode of governance.

Across a number of chapters Zhang presents a case that the “mass line” constitutes the missing analytical link in existing interpretations of China's approach to counter-terrorism, as it assists in the identification of both “friends and enemies” and guides the measures to be taken to defeat “enemies” and support the “people.” Chapter two, for instance, traces the utilization of the label of “hostile forces” in official discourse to identify and categorize “enemies” and how each categorization has lent itself to particular mass mobilization techniques to thwart “enemies” and support the “people” (pp. 52–70).

Chapters three, four and five then turn to the crucial question of how the mass line has explicitly informed counter-terrorism discourse and policy. These chapters demonstrate two important things about counter-terrorism in Xinjiang. First, they demonstrate how the discourse of Xi Jinping's declared "People's War on Terror" in Xinjiang has focused not only on the "traditional" interdiction and repression of real and perceived "enemies" (i.e. terrorists) but also the mobilization of the population – through financial incentives and ideological campaigns – to become active agents in the identification and repression of those that display the behaviours of "enemies" (pp. 90–92). Second, and perhaps most importantly with respect to the author's core argument, they demonstrate how the repressive policing aspects noted above are twinned both discursively and practically with the CCP's benevolent, "people-centred" desire to "rescue" and "educate" not only individual "terrorists" but also the wider population from which they come. This is most readily manifest in official descriptions of the functions of the "vocational education centres." But it is also apparent in a broader set of policies that are geared to educate, surveil and encourage the "development" of the Uyghur population beyond those detained in the "vocational education centres." Thus, for example, tens of thousands of CCP cadres have been mobilized for the "Visit, Benefit, Gather" (*fang, hui, ju*) campaign, where they "visit" Uyghur households to monitor behaviour and inculcate official narratives (pp. 107–109).

Although the book achieves its stated goal of providing an alternative lens through which to understand the CCP's repressive turn in Xinjiang, to this reviewer's mind it fails to grapple with the question that hangs over this issue: why has the CCP committed to this drastic course of action at this particular historical moment? This is admittedly a hugely challenging question. However, the author's stated desire for this work to serve as a "complement" to "existing works on Xinjiang that have been conducted by serious scholars" (p. 28) required that this question be addressed. As it stands, the work presents a number of threads that – if pulled harder – would have made its contribution toward answering this big question more explicit. For instance, while the author argues that the duality of China's "People's War on Terror," at once repressive and mobilizing, accords with the CCP's desire for legitimacy, it also arguably relates to the broader question of the Chinese state's relationship to Xinjiang. Arguably the discourse and practice of counter-terrorism in Xinjiang exhibits a fundamentally disciplinary – in the Foucauldian sense – function vis-à-vis the region's Turkic Muslim populations: to punish those displaying outwardly deviant behaviour and to "educate" others so that they may be "saved" from the fate of such "enemies." Viewed from this perspective, counter-terrorism in Xinjiang becomes a mode or expression of the colonial relationship that frames the Chinese state's perception of Xinjiang and its non-Han peoples.

Nonetheless *Legitimacy of China's Counter-Terrorism Approach* remains a noteworthy contribution to the field. It is concisely written and contains both insight and provocative arguments relevant to not only specialists in Xinjiang and Uyghur studies but also those with an interest in Chinese security policy and terrorism and counter-terrorism studies.

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