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The Mass Line Approach to Countering Violent Extremism in China: the Road from Propaganda to Hearts and Minds.

Edward Newman and Chi Zhang

Abstract

As a strategy to temper centralised governance with a degree of public participation in China, the ‘Mass Line’ approach has been used throughout the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to mobilise citizens in support of national projects and use this engagement as a channel for feedback. The Mass Line has been employed in attempts to address ‘radicalisation’ and challenges to centralised state control, indicating that the CCP’s approach to counter-terrorism goes beyond the top-down, oppressive tactics that China is often associated with. This paper explores China’s programmes of mass mobilisation as a part of its counter-radicalisation strategy in order to deepen understanding of how the country is responding to a key security challenge. It demonstrates that this approach reflects significant historical continuities, and thus national characteristics, in terms of political culture and state control.

Keywords: Counter-radicalisation, China, propaganda, Mass Line, mass mobilisation

Introduction

It is often assumed that China’s approach to radicalisation and terrorism – in areas such as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) – is predominantly or even entirely top-down, oppressive, and a demonstration of unbridled force.¹ The application of hard power, in the interests of national unity and stability and in response to opposition, has apparently been a defining characteristic of this approach in initiatives such as the ‘Strike Hard’ campaign and mass indoctrination programme in ‘vocational training camps’.² Oppressive surveillance and

¹ Liselotte Odgaard and Thomas Galasz Nielsen, ‘China’s counterinsurgency strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang,’ *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol.23(87), (2014): pp.535-555; Dibyesh Anand, ‘Colonization with Chinese characteristics: politics of (in) security in Xinjiang and Tibet’, *Central Asian Survey* 38(1), (2019), pp.129-147; Marie Trédaniel and Pak K. Lee. 2018. ‘Explaining the Chinese framing of the “terrorist” violence in Xinjiang: insights from securitization theory’, *Nationalities Papers* 46(1), (2019), pp.177-195; Anna Hayes, ‘Interwoven ‘Destinies’: The Significance of Xinjiang to the China Dream, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Xi Jinping Legacy’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29(121), (2019), pp.31-45.

² On ‘vocational training camps’ in Xinjiang, see Adrian Zenz, ‘Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude’: China’s Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang’, *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2019): 102–28; Adrian Zenz and James Leibold, ‘Securitizing Xinjiang: Police

control techniques have also attracted the attention of analysts internationally.³ Legitimacy, both to national and international audiences, and restraint have apparently not been a central aspect of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rationale. In this way, it might be assumed that China – as the archetypal powerful authoritarian state – approaches counter-terrorism in a manner which is fundamentally different to that of liberal democratic states governed by the rule of law. It may also be puzzling for some audiences that China's counter-radicalisation policies – often assumed to have little popular support or legitimacy – might enjoy any 'success', yet the country has experienced no major terrorist attacks since 2016.⁴

An important but under-explored feature of the Chinese state's approach to 'radicalisation' in the Uyghur case does not entirely fit with this broad characterisation, and this suggests that a more nuanced and contextualised analysis is necessary. Aside from the oppression that has accompanied Chinese policy, a key strategy has been to rally public support behind counter-terrorism through the 'Mass Line' approach. This involves mobilising communities in support of major national projects through extensive propaganda and public works campaigns, and this has long been an important guiding principle of the CCP. This paper explores how and why the Mass Line ethos has been deployed in China's counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation policies, and considers the implications of this for understanding how China perceives its security challenges. It argues that the Mass Line is meant, in part, to mitigate the more repressive elements of state policy, in order to reduce the possibility that counter-terrorism measures themselves might generate opposition and exacerbate extremism. This suggests an understanding on the part of the Chinese state that perpetrators of terrorism may seek to provoke heavy-handed countermeasures which involve targeting and 'othering' a particular group from within, a scenario that the state wishes to avoid. This conundrum, which involves responding to public security threats without alienating communities or exacerbating conflict, is equally challenging to both liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes. This also suggests that authoritarian countries – even very powerful ones such as China – may be restrained by the fear of popular protests that may escalate and develop into a major challenge to the regime. China's approach, underpinned by the Mass Line ethos, is thus a reflection of a desire to address extra-constitutional challenges – including potential insurgency – whilst maintaining control and avoiding heightening inter-communal tensions.

Recruitment, Informal Policing and Ethnic Minority Co-Optation', *The China Quarterly*, 2019, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741019000778>.

³ James Leibold, 'Surveillance in China's Xinjiang Region: Ethnic Sorting, Coercion, and Inducement', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol.29, issue 121, (2019), pp.46-60; Xiao Qiang, 'The Road to Digital Unfreedom: President Xi's Surveillance State'. *Journal of Democracy* 30(1) (2019), pp.53-67; D. Tobin, 'A "struggle of life or death": Han and Uyghur insecurities on China's north-west frontier' *The China Quarterly*, online first, (2019) pp.1-23, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574101900078X>

⁴ On the 'success' of authoritarian counterinsurgency, see Daniel Byman, "'Death Solves All Problems": The Authoritarian Model of Counterinsurgency', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2015): 62–93.

This paper focuses on the application of the Mass Line ethos in counter-terrorism, counter-radicalisation and countering violent extremism (CVE) at the local level in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Functioning as a guiding principle, the Mass Line theory is applied widely in major political campaigns, at least rhetorically. Through the Propaganda Department (*xuanchuanbu*) at the state, provincial and municipal levels, the propaganda work underpins policies, functioning to bridge the state and community by interpreting policies in a way that the public are willing to accept. This paper explores data collected from China's own reports of local engagement activities undertaken by 'Visit, Benefit and Gather' teams. Using official materials and Chinese media sources has limitations: state agents and government-affiliated news sources may exaggerate or fabricate numbers to show their 'achievements', and this material is obviously politically biased. However, the examination of these reports is an important step to understanding and framing and rationale of China's propaganda strategy and the importance it attaches to engagement and public mobilisation, even if the impact of policies cannot be corroborated. It also demonstrates the scale of China's counter-radicalisation Mass Line project, which penetrates deep into society.

An analysis of the Mass Line ethos in China's counter-terrorism programmes adds to the literature on authoritarian counterinsurgency, mobilisation and the search for legitimacy. As David Ucko observes, the puzzle of the ostensible 'success' of authoritarian counterinsurgency is in dire need of research that focuses on individual cases in their specific context.⁵ Such efforts help to identify patterns that invalidate a neatly delineated boundary between 'authoritarian' and 'democratic' approaches to counterinsurgency,⁶ and may point to counter-intuitive similarities. The existing research on counterinsurgency in Xinjiang more or less inherits the authoritarian/democratic divide.⁷ Odgaard and Nielsen problematised the categorisation of China's counterinsurgency, and consider China a 'special case' that deserves a detailed case study.⁸ The empirical evidence from this paper answers their call for a more nuanced understanding of China's counterinsurgency tactics.

The paper begins by exploring the Mass Line policy in theory and practice as it emerged following the consolidation of the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong, as a strategy to balance central control and popular engagement. It demonstrates the importance of propaganda in mobilising public support, and the gathering of feedback from citizens to the government, and shows how mass campaigns were integral to the CCP's approach to governance from its beginning. The following section analyses how the Mass Line approach has been applied to China's counter-radicalisation policies, in the context of its broader

⁵ David H. Ucko, "'The People Are Revolting": An Anatomy of Authoritarian Counterinsurgency', *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2016): 29–61.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Martin I. Wayne, *China's War on Terrorism: Counter-Insurgency, Politics and Internal Security* (London;New York: Routledge, 2008); James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁸ Liselotte Odgaard and Thomas Galasz Nielsen, 'China's Counterinsurgency Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 87 (2014): 537.

counter-terrorism strategy. It demonstrates that this approach reflects historical continuity in how the Chinese state approaches major challenges, and argues that this is important to understanding China's approach to terrorism and separatism. The conclusion considers the implications of this for the study of counter-terrorism, counter-radicalisation and countering violent extremism, and in particular the question of whether liberal and authoritarian states are fundamentally different in how they approach these challenges. The article's significance and originality come from its extensive use of Chinese language sources to deepen understanding of the distinct approaches of the Chinese state towards 'radicalisation', arguing that this does not neatly fit the mainstream narrative.

The Mass Line theory and practice

The Mass Line, initially conceived by Li Lisan and further theorised by Mao Zedong, became a guiding principle for the CCP to balance the relationship between centralised governance and popular support.⁹ At the heart of revolutionary doctrine is the belief that a key source of the CCP's strength and legitimacy is its ability to relate to and engage with the masses, and in turn the biggest threat to its survival is disconnection from the masses.¹⁰ Far from relying solely upon top-down power-based authority – often assumed to be the case to external observers – this engagement is central to governance in China and the CCP's control. Modelled on Marxist ideology, the Mass Line theory primarily supports the role of political elites – in the Chinese context, 'cadres' – to gather scattered, unsystematic opinions of the masses, in order to reflect on and improve their policies to better serve the people. Theoretically, the Mass Line is the Chinese solution to the challenge of implementing democracy in a population as large and diverse as China, to allow for public participation in the policy-making process, and to enable the CCP to make policy based on the consent of the people. In this process, the feedback provided by the masses is central to improving and legitimising stable governance. Without proper feedback, the fundamental premise of Mass Line would be ineffective, because the theory assumes that cadres are in the best position to understand the needs of society based on their local embeddedness, and thus they should propagate and educate the masses 'until they embrace them as their own'.¹¹ The Mass Line thus plays the role of 'educating' and engaging the masses and rallying the population in support of government policy.

Chinese communist theorists are acutely aware of the potential danger posed by the disconnection of a regime from its people, for the 'dictatorship' is justified or legitimised by

⁹ C. Zhang, Community engagement under the mass line for counter-terrorism in China. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44, (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1585636>

¹⁰ Y. Shi, In-depth reflections on strengthening the relationship between the Party and the masses [□加□党群关系的深入思考]. *Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism* 139 (2006), pp.54–57.

¹¹ Z. Mao, *Selected works of Mao Zedong (Vol 3)* [毛□□□集第3卷]. (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1991), p.899

representing and promoting the proletariat – the broadest masses of the Chinese people.¹² This assumption remains true for the current leadership, irrespective of whether the growing size of the middle class may change the socio-economic balance of the country. According to this belief, if the ruling party is no longer willing or able to represent the interests of the broadest masses of the people, the foundation of its monopoly of power is undermined. In order to ensure the survival of the CCP, therefore, it must reach out through means other than coercion.¹³ The Mass Line is enshrined as literally the ‘lifeline’ for the Party.¹⁴ It provides the political and philosophical basis for the CCP to legitimise its rule and justifies its control.

The CCP’s tradition of mass mobilisation is as old as itself, and is the foundation of the Mass Line approach. Thriving on student and peasant movements, Mao Zedong embedded the tradition of mass campaign into the genes of the CCP. Mass mobilisation played a central role in China’s historical mass campaigns, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. In contrast to Mao’s ‘struggle-style mobilisation’ (*douzheng shi dongyuan*) – mobilising some to struggle against others – mass mobilisation in the post-Mao era has been much less violent, and is characterised by incentives, punishment and competition.¹⁵ Both an instigator and a victim of large-scale political campaigns, Deng Xiaoping adopted a more cautious attitude towards mass mobilisation, believing that mass campaigns and ideological debates would exhaust China before it was able to develop.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in the absence of alternatives to rallying support, Deng’s successors continued to rely on mass campaigns to boost legitimacy. Notable examples are Jiang Zemin’s ‘Three Representatives’ campaign, Hu Jintao’s ‘Campaign to Maintain the Advanced Nature of Communist Party Members’, and Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign.¹⁷

¹² W. Wang, It is reasonable to stick to people’s democratic dictatorship [坚持人民民主专政，并不合理]，(2014)，http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwg/2014-09/23/c_1112586776.htm (accessed 8.19.19). Yan, S. Resolutely overcome the greatest danger of disconnection from the masses [坚决克服脱离群众的最大危险]，(2018) People’s Daily. <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0513/c1003-29984699.html> (accessed 8.19.19).

¹³ On means other than coercion, see Johannes Gerschewski, ‘The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes’, *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (January 2013): 13–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738860>.

¹⁴ J. Xi, Mass line is the lifeline and the fundamental working principle of the Party [群众路线是党的生命和根本工作路线]，(2013)，<http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0721/c397563-27338348.html> (accessed 12.14.17).

¹⁵ R. Lian, How did the phenomenon of left leaning happen during the Land reform era [土改时期的“左”现象何以产生]. *Open Times* 5, (2015); Lian, R., The “struggle-style movement” as social mobilisation [作为社会手段的“斗争式运动”]. *Sea of Knowledge* 3, (2014), pp.69–80.

¹⁶ Z. Gao, On Deng Xiaoping’s views on “to advocate” and “not to advocate” [小平“争”和“不争”主旨] *The History of the People’s Republic of China*, (2013) http://www.hprc.org.cn/gsyj/yjjg/zggsyjxh_1/gsnhlw_1/d12jgsxslw/201310/t20131019_244902.html (accessed 4.28.19).

¹⁷ S.C. Angle, Must we choose our leaders? human rights and political participation in China. *Journal of Global Ethics* 1, (2005), pp.177–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449620500319304>; Forde, B.,

When Xi Jinping became general secretary of the CCP and President of the PRC, he soon embarked upon another revival of the Mass Line approach. As he stated:

People's support is a matter of life and death for the Party. Only by linking the heart, breath and destiny of the Party with the people, and always relying on the people to move forward in history, can the Party be as strong as a rock.¹⁸

The Mass Line approach in counter-radicalisation

The tradition of engaging with the masses for political purposes is translated into concrete policies in a number of areas, including counter-terrorism and in countering violent extremism. At the state level, the role of the public is written into the Anti-Terrorism Law, which provides the legal grounds for further interpretation at the local level. The law provides the concepts of 'Mass Prevention and Mass Governance' (*qunfang qunzhi*) and 'Combining Specialised Efforts with the Mass Line' (*zhuanqun jiehe*) to guide practice. The deliberation of the Anti-Terrorism Law also shows an emphasis on the role of citizens. The 2014 draft law involves raising the awareness of the public and promoting a better understanding of policies, with the help of educational and religious institutions and propaganda departments.¹⁹ In turn, the Anti-Terrorism Law itself, passed in 2015, places emphasis on the potential contribution of the masses in prevention, and urges the public to participate in counterterrorism practice more actively.²⁰ In Xinjiang, a key region affected by separatist movements and a focus for China's counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation activities, this is facilitated by an elaborate network of public engagement.

China's mobilisation strategy relies heavily on propaganda. Contrary to general belief, propaganda is not seen as intrinsically 'bad', even in the Western context.²¹ The CCP sees 'propaganda work' (*xuanchuan gongzuo*) as a legitimate mobilisation tactic, which aims to wash away 'distorted', ill-informed or pernicious information with a flood of 'correct' and positive information. Rather than being morally dubious, in China propaganda plays an essential role in promoting the 'correct' ideology that will benefit the Chinese nation as a whole. However, the attempt to distinguish between 'correct' and 'incorrect' ideology per se

2013. China's "Mass Line" Campaign. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2013/09/chinas-mass-line-campaign-2/> (accessed 9.28.18).

¹⁸ Quoted in J. Xu and Y. Zhou, Xi Jinping delivered an important speech on the Party's Mass Line Education Practices Working Conference [党的群众路□教育□践活□工作会□召开 □近平□表重要 □ □] Xinhua, (2013) http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-06/18/c_116194026.htm (accessed 12.14.17).

¹⁹ Zhang, Community engagement under the mass line for counter-terrorism in China.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ P. Kenez, *The birth of the propaganda state: Soviet methods of mass mobilization, 1917-1929*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.2; Stanley, J., *How Propaganda Works*. (Oxford: Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015), p.37.

is problematic, as the increasingly narrow definition of the ‘correct’ ideology contributes to the creation of a façade of plurality in a society that is increasingly less so. This illusion is dangerous as the silenced dissent may erupt into more serious opposition and lead to significant opposition to the CCP. Mass propaganda without proper feedback therefore robs the CCP of the opportunity to address the grievances of the population before they escalate into something more subversive. The public engagement in the Mass Line approach is therefore designed to be a two-way process.

The Mass Line, as it is applied in countering terrorism and extremism, has evolved through various initiatives which balance coercion and community engagement. The ‘Combining Specialised Efforts with the Mass Line’ has been applied to various ‘Strike Hard’ campaigns in Xinjiang, aimed at proactively addressing violent extremism.²² The ‘Mass Prevention and Mass Governance’ programme is a continuation of the community policing model that was consolidated from the founding of the People’s Republic of China through to the opening-up era in the 1980s.²³ This approach is based on the ‘Fengqiao experience’ – named after a district in Zhuji city, Zhejiang province – which dealt with class ‘enemies’ in the 1960s, and developed into a model aimed at enhancing ‘societal security and comprehensive governance’ in the 1980s, which was in turn adjusted for the purpose of maintaining stability in the 1990s.²⁴ Lan Weiqing, Vice Director of the Chinese Association of Socialism, glorified the Fengqiao Experience as a democratic approach to security governance, while a more liberal writer, Qian Gang of Hong Kong University, warned of the revival of the ‘enemy mentality’ that plagued the Mao era.²⁵

It is important to appreciate the scale of activities aimed at rallying and engaging with the public, oriented around propaganda, public works and individual incentives, all underpinned by a message of social cohesion and ideological correctness. The rest of this section will provide detail of this, based upon Chinese language sources. A key component of the Mass Line is a large-scale programme, ‘Visit, Benefit and Gather’, which focuses on economic

²² S. Guo, Combining Specialised Efforts with the Mass Line, make unremitting efforts to eliminate drugs and benefit the people [□群□合 □禁□毒品造福人民不懈□斗], (2013), http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-06/25/content_2434242.htm (accessed 5.4.19); Jiang, Y., “Strike Hard” must “Combine Specialised Efforts with the Mass Line” [“□打”斗争必□“□群□合”], (2002), <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/guandian/26/20020522/734006.html> (accessed 5.4.19).

²³ L.Y. Zhong, Community policing in China: old wine in new bottles. *Police Practice and Research* 10, (2009), pp, 157–169, 158

²⁴ G. Qian, The strange historical cycle of “Fengqiao Experience” [□□ : “□□□□”的□史怪圈], (2013), <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/special/zbo/commentary/story20131019-266439> (accessed 5.4.19).

²⁵ W. Lan, Why “Fengqiao Experience” became a Chinese experience [“□□□□”□什么能成□中国□□], (2013), <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n/2013/1014/c117092-23198117.html> (accessed 5.4.19); Qian, The strange historical cycle of “Fengqiao Experience”

development and public engagement in Xinjiang.²⁶ The official discourse surrounding the programme highlights the key themes of culture, wellbeing, local organisation and social stability.²⁷ The high frequency of the expression ‘counter-radicalisation’ (*qu jiduanhua*, literally translated as de-extremification) in this discourse indicates that this is essentially a programme aimed at maintaining stability in the context of – or the perceived challenge of – radicalisation.

Introduced in 2014, the ‘Visit, Benefit and Gather’ programme has involved cadres conducting many rounds of visits to local communities in Xinjiang. Each round is divided into three stages. The first stage focuses on visiting the masses to understand their situation (*fang minqing*). This involves sending cadres to villagers’ homes to discuss their concerns, and gathering information regarding family members, their health, employment, income and housing. Cadres are required to visit homes a certain number of times and stay there for a number of days. In some cases, each member of the Visit, Benefit and Gather working team is required to team up with a village cadre to ensure that cadres get a sense of the local context.²⁸ In some cases a cadre is teamed up with a Uyghur family to learn each others’ languages, with the hope of promoting some form of kinship.²⁹ Ironically, photos taken to substantiate the claims about cadres’ performance have become evidence for human rights organisations of a violation of privacy and civil rights.³⁰

The second stage of engagement builds on the previous one and involves activities that ‘benefit the people’ (*hui minsheng*). How much benefit is brought is measured by looking at actual ‘projects that benefit the people’ (*huimin gongcheng*). For example, in 2014, cadres and the Visit, Benefit and Gather working teams in Khotan carried out 9,198 such projects, which solved problems regarding water scarcity, access to energy, housing, and medical care. In 2015, 9,611 villages across Xinjiang allocated 4.77 billion yuan for such projects, so that 500,000 yuan was secured for each village in order to improve living conditions.³¹

²⁶ On a comprehensive discussion about China’s strategy for de-radicalisation and the ‘Visit, Benefit and Gather’ programme, see Zunyou Zhou, ‘Chinese Strategy for De-Radicalization’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 9 June 2017, 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1330199>.

²⁷ D. Hai, Effect Analysis of “Cadres Station in Villages” Activity in Xinjiang Based on Content Analysis - Taking 110 Job Briefs in 2014 as examples [基于内容分析法的新疆“□惠聚”活□□施效果分析——以2014年110篇工作□□□例]. (Xinjiang Agricultural University, 2016)

²⁸ XUAR Bureau of Quality Supervision, Bureau of Quality Supervision report on the third “Visit, Benefit and Gather” activities [自治区□□局第三批“□惠聚”活□□□], (2016), <http://www.xjzj.gov.cn/2016nzd/2016nfhj/xxjb/44615.htm> (accessed 4.21.19).

²⁹ C. Wang, Chinese Academy of Sciences Xinjiang branch carried out “Visit, Benefit and Gather” teaming-up activities [中科院新疆分院□□子推□“□惠聚”深入开展], (2016), <http://news.sciencenet.cn/htmlnews/2016/11/362010.shtm> (accessed 5.9.19).

³⁰ Human Rights Watch, China: Visiting Officials Occupy Homes in Muslim Region. Human Rights Watch, (2018), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/13/china-visiting-officials-occupy-homes-muslim-region> (accessed 8.27.18).

³¹ K. Ma, Consolidate the foundation, improve wellbeing and social cohesion: a documentary of 200,000 cadres’ trip to the grassroots units [□基固本 改善民生 □聚民心——新疆20万干部下基□“

Sometimes the ‘benefit’ involves a direct donation of daily necessities such as rice and cooking oil to poor households.³² In 2016, 10,148 ‘benefit’ projects were implemented at the village level aimed at promoting social cohesion, preventing the emergence of grievances, and thus serving the broad objectives of counter-radicalisation.³³

The third stage brings together the ‘achievements’ of the first two and focuses on ‘gathering together people’s hearts’ (*ju minxi*) to enhance loyalty and political conformity. It is difficult to measure the extent to which the masses are genuinely ‘converted’ to believe in the Party. This goal is often evaluated by claims which are sometimes dubious but which nevertheless demonstrate the scale and depth of propaganda activities. A Xinhua article reported that the Visit, Benefit and Gather programme has facilitated visits by 200,000 cadres in Xinjiang to over 8,000 administrative villages, 700 state-owned farms and pastures and 1000 key communities (*zhongdian shequ*).³⁴ *Xinjiang Daily* reported more specifically that 43,800 Visit, Benefit and Gather working teams of 275,000 cadres have participated in the programme.³⁵

Substantiating ‘hearts and minds’ ideological propaganda with material aid, the Visit, Benefit and Gather programme delivers the scale and quality of counter-radicalisation propaganda. This is framed with the themes of ‘full coverage’ propaganda (*quanmian fugai*), ‘blotting out the sky and covering the earth’ (*putian gaidi*), ‘leaving no blank’ (*buliu kongbai*), and ‘into the hearts and into the minds’ (*runao ruxin*).³⁶

In the early stage, counter-radicalisation propaganda focused on ‘full coverage’, the evidence of which is demonstrated by the number of households visited and ‘benefit’ projects carried out. Dou Wangui, Secretary of the Aksu Party Committee, stated that ‘we should create an environment in Aksu where everyone participates in counter-radicalisation, everyone

□民情、惠民生、聚民心”活□□□], (2015), Xinhua. http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/20/c_128249017.htm (accessed 12.16.17).

³² Wang, Chinese Academy of Sciences Xinjiang branch carried out “Visit, Benefit and Gather” teaming-up activities

³³ *Xinjiang Daily*, Six reporters were awarded 2.2 million for providing clues relating to violent terrorist crimes [新疆重□ 6 名□□暴恐犯罪重大□索群众 □金达 220 万], (2016), <http://mil.huanqiu.com/china/2016-10/9523950.html?agt=15422> (accessed 2.2.17).

³⁴ G. Du, For the fourth year in a row, Xinjiang has carried out the work of “Visit, Benefit and Gather” in the villages [新疆□□第四年开展“□民情惠民生聚民心”□村工作] (2017), http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-02/25/c_1120529757.htm (accessed 12.16.17).

³⁵ *Xinjiang Daily*, “Visit, Benefit and Gather” work has won praise [“□惠聚”工作□□誉], (2017), <http://www.xjyc.gov.cn/html/rdgz/2017-7-6/1323098063.html> (accessed 11.8.20).

³⁶ M. Li, 200,000 cadres in Xinjiang go down to 10,000 villages [新疆 20 万名机关干部下基□住万村], (2014), <http://xj.people.com.cn/n/2014/0218/c360793-20594811.html> (accessed 3.20.17); Zhang, Q., 2016. Aksu city implemented the “six into” measure to push forward counter-radicalisation [阿克□市“六□”措施 深入推□“去极端化”工作]://www.xjztb.gov.cn/2016-10/14/content_556677.htm (accessed 4.23.19).

propagates counter-radicalisation, and everyone condemns religious extremism'.³⁷ This literally was an attempt to mobilise the entire local community.

'Full coverage' in local regions is further divided into three levels: village, household and individual.³⁸ The vast number of propaganda talks (according to Chinese media and official sources) is frequently used as an indicator for demonstrating cadres' achievements and it conveys the scale of the engagement. Across Xinjiang in 2016, regional news sources claimed that the Visit, Benefit and Gather working teams delivered 6,963,000 propaganda talks on topics related to community, cohesion, and duty.³⁹ This would mean an average of some 17,000 talks per day. Even if this is exaggerated, the sheer scale demonstrates the reach of local counter-radicalisation propaganda, and the historical experience of China in other policy areas does more reliably confirm similar levels of mass mobilization and engagement. Moreover, some corroboration of this scale is provided in reports of other, similar activities. In the same year, the Kizilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture government disseminated over 2000 propaganda posters, 6000 propaganda brochures and flyers and organised 8 pledging events for publicly pledging loyalty to the Party.⁴⁰ To make propaganda materials accessible, the Kazak Autonomous Prefecture of Ili produced one-page propaganda and pocketbooks.⁴¹ Propaganda talks (*xuanjiang*) were organised to engage targeted audiences. In Baicheng county, the government adjusted the propaganda talks to include employment training, and ensured that 'there are propaganda talks every day, and there are events in every village'.⁴²

This structure is accompanied by a devolution from higher to lower levels of the government, so that cadres at higher levels give talks to those from lower levels. For example, in Yanqi county, at the top level, cadres at the county level travelled to villages to give 60 talks about 'three histories', 'five outlooks' and ethnic and religious policy. Their talks have reached 12,000 people. They also gave 200 talks in villages and schools, providing policy briefings for 65,000 attendees regarding issues such as education and marriage law. At the middle level, village cadres went to each household, organising similar talks that have reached 100,000

³⁷ M. Ding, Y. Yu, H. Zhang, and H. Ren, Local cadres are keen to study the XUAR Ordinances on Counter-radicalisation [新疆各地干部群众掀起学《自治区去极端化条例》潮], (2017), <http://www.cankaoxiaoxi.com/china/20170408/1861555.shtml> (accessed 12.16.17).

³⁸ D. Pang, Commentary: "Counter-radicalisation" must work its way into people's heart [“去极端化”关□要做到百姓心坎上], (2015), <http://xj.people.com.cn/n/2015/0101/c368617-23414000.html> (accessed 4.24.19).

³⁹ Xinjiang Daily, "Visit, Benefit and Gather" work has won praise.

⁴⁰ D. Zhang, Kizilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture: counter-radicalisation achievements of "four changes and four transformations" in Keziletao town in Akto county [克州：阿克陶□克孜勒陶□“四□四□”深化“去极端化”成果], (2016), http://www.xjztb.gov.cn/2016-10/12/content_555868.htm (accessed 4.22.19).

⁴¹ Ding et al, Local cadres are keen to study the XUAR Ordinances on Counter-radicalisation

⁴² X. Gong, The Party spirit spread into every house like spring breeze in Tarim [党的精神□万家春□激□塔里木], (2019), http://news.aksxw.com/content/2019-03/27/content_949781.htm (accessed 4.22.19).

people. They also organised events such as flag raising ceremonies and various cultural activities over 3,000 times, which involved 245,000 people.⁴³ In February 2017, a series of counter-radicalisation talks covering 93 villages were organised in the Khotan region. In December 2017, the local government decided to extend the scope to 594 villages and 6,000 communities.⁴⁴

Cadres made use of community members – students who had returned from their universities in other provinces, successful business people, and retired cadres – to act as ‘grassroots propagandists’ (*caogen xuanjiang yuan*). In the Khotan region, by January 2016, over 2,000 propaganda talk teams (*xuanjiang tuan/dui*) had trained 5,000 propagandists through 30,000 talks.⁴⁵ Scholars and prisoners were asked to give concrete examples of the benefit brought by being loyal to the Party and the dangers of miscreance.⁴⁶ Business people propagate the Party’s ‘good policies’ and how they have gained wealth by making use of them.⁴⁷ By November 2014, the Qitai county government trained 45 bilingual propagandists on minority policies and how to distinguish between illegal and normal religious activities.⁴⁸ In January 2016, the Asku and the Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture government organised a 20-day intensive training for 140 propagandists including patriotic believers.⁴⁹ In Aksu city, 28 grassroots propaganda teams consisting of 256 propagandists delivered 720 talks, reaching over 178,000 people.⁵⁰ A 71-year-old retired resident, Shalekejiang Yiming, has worked for 9 years as a voluntary propagandist. He has been carrying out flag-raising ceremony in his own back yard, and has apparently given 300 propaganda talks to 30,000 people.⁵¹

⁴³ Kunlunwang Using innovative methods and means to construct platform networks at three levels [新形式 用活 载体 着力 构筑 三 宣 网 平台] (2016) http://swbi2.xjftc.gov.cn/zt/hmzt/jyj1/201611/t20161101_132913.html (accessed 11.8.20).

⁴⁴ Xinjiang Economics, The educational programme of XUAR “counter-radicalisation” series talks is launched [自治区“去极端化”系列宣 教教育活 载体], (2017), http://www.xjtz.gov.cn/2017-03/21/c_1120665949.htm (accessed 4.22.19).

⁴⁵ Q. Duan, What is the Baogunang-style narratives [“包谷”式的 言 述是 的], (2016) <https://freewechat.com/a/MzA3MDM3MjEyMQ==/2650663964/4> (accessed 5.1.17).

⁴⁶ Xinjiang Economics, The educational programme of XUAR “counter-radicalisation” series talks is launched.

⁴⁷ Duan, What is the Baogunang-style narratives; Zhang, Aksu city implemented the “six into” measure to push forward counter-radicalisation

⁴⁸ H. Li and X. Wu, Qitai county carried out “counter-radicalisation” cadre training class for “bilingual” propagandists [奇台 “去极端化” “双 ” 宣 骨干培 班], (2014), http://news.ifeng.com/a/20141201/42612739_0.shtml (accessed 5.1.17).

⁴⁹ W. Akenmuhali, ‘Deradicalisation’ propaganda cadre training session was held in the Aksu region [阿克 地区 “去极端化” 宣 教骨干培 班], (2016), <https://www.toutiao.com/i6238436444285698561/> (accessed 5.1.17)

⁵⁰ Zhang, Aksu city implemented the “six into” measure to push forward counter-radicalisation.

⁵¹ Y. Wang, XUAR “Visit, Benefit and Gather” working teams succeeded in the mass work using innovative methods [全区各 “惠聚” 村工作 新方式做好群众工作], (2018), http://www.xjftc.gov.cn/zt/hmzt/jyj1/201802/t20180206_135485.html (accessed 4.24.19).

In schools, a variety of media have been employed to ‘purify’ the environment – podcasts, radio, and campus student networks. The 99 schools in Aksu city were equipped with 76 Vice Chancellors familiar with the relevant legal guidelines. 31 student cultural and art teams were established for the purpose of counter-radicalisation propaganda and education. Teachers contacted 58 children who were ‘on the radar’ in terms of being of concern. Teachers were also organised to write 30 versions of a ‘native textbook’ for counter-radicalisation aimed at localising the language of counter-radicalisation propaganda, tens of thousands of which were printed. 24,000 students also visited patriotic education bases (*aiguozhuyi jiaoyu jidi*).⁵² In Awat county, the government invited returning students to give 171 talks, to which a total of 65,000 people listened.⁵³

Students were trained in universities so that when they return home during holidays they can act as propagandists. A study of counter-radicalisation education in Kashgar Normal College detailed this process.⁵⁴ When students officially enrolled, their teacher organised a one-week, recorded induction meeting, focusing on the condemnation of violent extremism. Class meetings are held every Sunday, and ‘political study sessions’ every Wednesday throughout the academic year. The former were supervised by the teacher in charge, and the latter was subject to inspection by cadres of the students’ union. When they got home, they are required to participate in counter-radicalisation propaganda to propagate the ‘facts’ about terrorists incidents to those ‘who were ignorant of them’.⁵⁵ Proof of participation issued by local residents’ committees was required to be submitted together with a 2,000-word report by the student.

Interesting insights emerge when looking at the volume of attendees in mobilisation activities in relation to local population size. On March 2017, on a middle school playground in Khotan, local officials delivered a talk to over 30,000 ‘believer representatives’, village representatives, youth representatives and local cadre representatives.⁵⁶ By 2017, the Uyghur population in the entire Khotan region was 2,445,200.⁵⁷ Thus, one such a propaganda event alone covers over 1% of its Uyghur population. In a small town – Artux, with a population of around 40,000 – about 25% of its population attended a propaganda talk on 21 October

⁵² Zhang, Aksu city implemented the “six into” measure to push forward counter-radicalisation.

⁵³ Gong, The Party spirit spread into every house like spring breeze in Tarim.

⁵⁴ F. Zhao, A model: occupy the high ground of ideology for counter-terrorism and stability maintenance [一种模式: 占□反恐□□意□形□□域的□略高地]. *Heihe Journal* 4, (2015), pp.50–51.

⁵⁵ Zhao, A model: occupy the high ground of ideology for counter-terrorism and stability maintenance, p.51.

⁵⁶ M. Wang, This is Khotan style! You haven’t seen the spectacular scene of such a talk to 30,000 people [□就是和田范儿! 3万人的大宣□□面, 你肯定没□□], (2017), <https://freewechat.com/a/MzA3MTExMDY3MQ==/2651200688/2> (accessed 4.22.19).

⁵⁷ Khotan Government, Population and ethnicity [人口与民族], (2018), <https://www.xjht.gov.cn/article/show.php?itemid=54808> (accessed 5.6.19).

2016.⁵⁸ In Tuoli county, from January to July 2017, the county government had delivered 2,250 talks to over 124,000 people.⁵⁹ Given that its population is 97,772, some people must have attended the talks more than once. Statistically, propagandists in this county have reached the goal of ‘full coverage’ in a literal sense. Even if some of these figures – primarily drawing upon official sources – are exaggerated, that does not alter the basic point, which is that the state pursues a broad and thorough community engagement strategy, involving mobilisation, as a part of its counter radicalisation strategy.

As the propaganda strategy has developed, there has been a shift from indiscriminate, full-coverage dissemination that aimed to ‘flood’ the populace with ‘correct’ knowledge, to a more selective, targeted strategy that differentiates propaganda strategy according to the specific target audience. The former is framed as ‘flood irrigation’ and the latter ‘drip irrigation’.⁶⁰ The latter is designed to complement the former in thoroughly implanting the counter-radicalisation message into people’s ‘hearts and minds’.⁶¹

The shifting strategy reflects cadres’ understanding of the composition of radicalised and radical-prone individuals. Cadres believe that the majority of vulnerable people choose to follow extremists ‘blindly’. For them, ‘extremists’ have long rivalled local governments and created an environment where religious institutions have effectively replaced local governments to perform daily administrative functions such as marriage and divorce. According to Xiaokaiti Yasheng, Secretary of the Political and Legal Commission of Yutian County in Khotan, of those who have been affected by religious extremist ideology, 5% were ‘diehards’, and 15% were ‘followers’, while the other 80% followed others blindly.⁶² Zhang Yun, Secretary of the Party Committee of Xinjiang Department of Justice, stated that, based on his experience, in a village, usually 70% of the people who have been affected by extremist ideology were coerced by religious extremists, while the other 30% were ‘contaminated by religious extremist forces’, and very few people have involved in planning and committing actual crimes.⁶³ According to several officials in South Xinjiang, 80% of the believers are from a lower educational background, and they have little knowledge about Islamic doctrines and laws.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Department of United Front, Kizilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture: Artux city initiated ten thousand people-propaganda talk [克州：阿□什市开展“去极端化”万人宣□活□], (2016), http://www.xjztb.gov.cn/2016-10/25/content_559083.htm (accessed 4.22.19).

⁵⁹ Tacheng Prefectural United Front, Tacheng Tuoli: 1234 towards the victory of mass propaganda talks [塔城托里：1234 吹响基□大宣□的号角], (2017), http://www.xjztb.gov.cn/2017-07/06/c_1121276778.htm (accessed 4.22.19).

⁶⁰ F. Chen, A survey of Xinjiang counter-radicalisation [新疆去极端化□□] Fenghuang, (2015), <http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/xjqjdh/> (accessed 3.20.17).

⁶¹ Zheng, Squeeze by correct faith, counteract by culture, restrain by law [正信□□ 文化□冲 法治□束], (2016), http://xjztb.gov.cn/2016-03/14/content_509505_3.htm (accessed 4.25.19).

⁶² Chen, A survey of Xinjiang counter-radicalisation.

⁶³ Chen, A survey of Xinjiang counter-radicalisation.

⁶⁴ Chen, A survey of Xinjiang counter-radicalisation.

This has two implications from the perspective of the government regarding how to treat ‘radicals’. The extremist ‘minority’ is to be ‘isolated’ and ‘stricken’, while the blindly following ‘majority’ is to be united and educated.⁶⁵ First, Strike Hard, a coercive response, is necessary to pave the way for the following mass campaigns.⁶⁶ Officials believe that a demonstration of power alone can influence the choice of the allegiance of the majority. When they come to the realisation that the state is the sole legitimate user of force, it is then much easier for the ‘flood’ of propaganda to be effective. In mass mobilisation campaigns the state has replaced religious institutions to become the only legitimate provider of information in Muslim-majority areas where traditionally religion had played a more important role in shaping people’s worldview. The high cost of noncompliance, as evidenced by all the examples in propaganda talks, discourages people from resisting. Second, the ‘ill-informed’ majority is categorised as people who are better than criminals but less qualified than ‘normal citizens’, which is why they need proper ‘propaganda and education’ (*xuanjiao*).⁶⁷ These people are further categorised and treated differently according to their level of loyalty. Government officials believe that many youths became an easy target for radicalisation simply because they have too much leisure time. Winter, which is a five-month slack time for peasants, is when local officials try to keep them busy and fill their minds and occupy their time with ‘appropriate’ things: military training, bilingual education, employment training and patriotic education such as singing ‘red songs’ in praise of the CCP.⁶⁸ On the other side of the spectrum, high-risk individuals are categorised as ‘focus personnel’ (*zhongdian renyuan*) and received special attention in ‘propaganda and education’. ‘Normal masses’ receive ‘flood-irrigation-style’ propaganda talks, and ‘key personnel’ are subject to one-on-one ‘help and education’.⁶⁹

In Yining county, focus personnel were further classified, according to rather vague but instructive criteria, into four groups. Individuals detained during the Strike Hard campaign constituted Group A, and received 20 days of training; Individuals who were ‘stubborn’ were allocated in Group B and received 15 days of training; ‘Ideologically unstable’ and religious individuals were put in Group C and received 7 days of training; those who were less influenced by religious extremism and likely to be ‘transformed’ were put in Group D.⁷⁰ Group A and B were trained by the County Political and Legal Affairs Committee, while

⁶⁵ People’s Congress, 2017. Ordinances on counter-radicalisation in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region [新疆维吾尔自治区去极端化条例].

⁶⁶ Chen, A survey of Xinjiang counter-radicalisation.

⁶⁷ Chabuchaer County, Chabuchaer County held a centralised transformation through education training session [察布查尔县集中教育转化培训班], (2015), <http://www.guizujiuye.com/html/tgzxxdt20154810491.html> (accessed 8.29.18).

⁶⁸ M. Yi, Intensive “counter-radicalisation” propaganda and education in Yining county [伊宁县造“去极端化”宣传教育威猛声], (2015), <http://www.xjdaily.com/culture/002/1171759.shtml> (accessed 4.25.19).

⁶⁹ Yi, Intensive “counter-radicalisation” propaganda and education in Yining county.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Group C and D by village and town cadres.⁷¹ To incentivise them to attend the training, despite budgetary constraints, local governments provide free training and a 10 yuan bursary for each trainee.⁷²

As noted earlier, the counter-radicalisation discourse is closely intertwined with development themes as well as culture.⁷³ Culture is part of the ‘five keys’ approach that Zhang Chunxian, the then-Party Secretary of the XUAR, proposed.⁷⁴ It includes dimensions in preventing radicalisation:

Ideological problems should be tackled with ideological methods, cultural problems should be tackled with cultural methods, issues regarding custom should be tackled with respect, issues regarding religion should be tackled according to religious regulations, terrorism should be tackled according to law and Strike Hard.

Accordingly, this strategy was adopted in local propaganda practices. In the propaganda teams of the Xayar county government,

Party cadres talked about policies, legal experts talked about law, volunteers talked about civilisation, teachers talk about science, returning students talk about their feelings,⁷⁵ medical staff talked about health, cultural workers and artists talked about culture, technology experts talked about technology, mass organisations⁷⁶ talked about fashion...⁷⁷

Cultural activities as a form of counter-radicalisation propaganda include such things as dance and painting competitions, sports events and quizzes. One of the activities, the ‘Little Apple’ dance contest, mobilised 10 teams of 1235 participants, the age of whom ranged from 5 to 82.⁷⁸ Propaganda in the form of cultural events does not require dedicated venues except stadia and town squares. The initial ‘success’ of this tactic in Jiashi prompted other county

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ On the ideological orientation of China’s development programmes see V. Elena Barabantseva, ‘Development as Localization: Ethnic Minorities in China’s Official Discourse on the Western Development Project’, *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2009): 225–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710902809393>.

⁷⁴ C. Zeng, Make use of “five keys” to improve “counter-radicalisation” work [用好“五把钥匙”深入推□“去极端化”工作], (2014), <http://tlf.xjkunlun.cn/zgpd/fkww/2014/4579543.htm> (accessed 5.11.19).

⁷⁵ The ‘feelings’ of returning students mainly involves the difference they felt when they left Xinjiang and entered into their universities in other provinces.

⁷⁶ ‘Mass organisation’, literally translated as ‘mass collective organisation’, refers to civil societies such as ‘All-China Federation of Trade Unions’ ‘China Law Society’ ‘Communist Youth League of China’ and ‘All-China Women’s Federation’.

⁷⁷ Gong, The Party spirit spread into every house like spring breeze in Tarim.

⁷⁸ Pang, Commentary: “Counter-radicalisation” must work its way into people’s heart.

governments to copy and localise the experience, which resulted in 100,000, around 26% of the entire population in the region, participating in their various versions of the ‘Little Apple’ dance contest at different times and in different places.⁷⁹ In November 2014, a nang-baking⁸⁰ competition was held to promote national unity in Kalpin county. One of the candidates managed to inscribe their nang with ‘oppose separatism and construct harmonious Xinjiang’ in the Uyghur language.⁸¹ Wensu government implemented a ‘propaganda talks + art and literature + culture’ model to embed counter-radicalisation messages into cultural products.⁸² Aksu government encouraged cultural workers to produce 3 minifilms in the Uyghur language and 5 documentaries.⁸³ In the second round of ‘Visit, Benefit and Gather’, Korla city organised 894 such cultural events which involved 77,000 participants.⁸⁴

Another dimension of China’s counter-radicalisation propaganda worth noting is the role of gender. A challenge China has in common with countries around the world is in separating Muslims’ appearance from radicalisation. The decision of women to wear a full-body robe has been placed in the centre of the debate concerning national security, inviting a cascade of criticism on the violation of human rights. Holding the conviction that women who are forced to stay at home and rely entirely on their husband are vulnerable to radicalisation, government officials pay special attention to the education of women as a part of China’s counter-radicalisation strategy. In December 2017, a counter-radicalisation propaganda unit targeting ethnic ‘stay-at-home wives’ was established to provide education and training for unemployed housewives.⁸⁵ Ethnic women are often encouraged to speak up against radicalisation. Rehanguli Yimier, a Uyghur National People’s Congress Representative, has often gone down “to the grassroots to give propaganda talks using her own experience”.⁸⁶ Genuine job training that enables women to become economically independent may well be helpful to open their minds to ideas other than those imposed on them by their husband and communities. However, a dangerous tendency that comes with framing gender roles in this

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ ‘Nang’ is a traditional bakery in Xinjiang.

⁸¹ X. Wang and D. Are, Xinjiang Kalpin county held a Nang-baking competition; delicious Nang attracted the public [新疆柯坪□烤□比□美味引众人□□], (2014), <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2014-11-11/160531127850.shtml> (accessed 4.22.19).

⁸² Gong, The Party spirit spread into every house like spring breeze in Tarim.

⁸³ L. Qin, Aksu: strengthen the comprehensive immersive propaganda education to reach people’s hearts [阿克□：□化浸入式宣□教育突出全面覆盖深入人心], (2016), http://www.xjtz.gov.cn/2016-10/10/content_555360.htm (accessed 4.22.19).

⁸⁴ Korla City Organisation Department, Korla city “five carry-outs” to promote “counter-radicalisation” work [□□勒市“五个起来”扎□推□“去极端化”工作], (2015), http://www.xjftc.gov.cn/zt/hmzt/jyjl/201505/t20150504_124895.html (accessed 4.24.19).

⁸⁵ L. Shi, A “counter-radicalisation” propaganda base was established in Urumqi [□□木□：“去极端化”宣教基地成立], (2015), <http://xj.people.com.cn/n2/2015/1229/c188514-27419469.html> (accessed 5.1.17).

⁸⁶ Y. Li and F. Chen, “Counter-radicalisation” should utilise “she-power” “去极端化”要□□“她力量”, (2015), http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw//npc/dbdhhy/12_3/2015-03/09/content_1917071.htm (accessed 4.23.19).

way, despite ostensibly seeking to emancipate women, is that it essentialises human subjects in a patriarchal manner.

Gendered counter-radicalisation propaganda has therefore arguably created a static and stereotyped vision of Uyghur women, ignoring the diversity among them. It reinforces the dichotomy between ‘beautiful women who do not wear jilbab’ versus ‘ugly women who believe in religious extremism’. Jilbab is a kind of long outer garment worn by some Uyghur women. Counter-radicalisation propaganda puts forward an image of energetic and versatile Uyghur women who love to wear beautiful Atlas silk clothes and sing and dance, to counteract the extremist doctrines that encourage wearing jilbab and forbid singing and dancing.⁸⁷ ‘Beauty projects’ (*liangli gongcheng*) were carried out to facilitate women’s transition from ‘jilbab/veil-wearing ugly extremists’ to ‘Atlas silk-wearing, singing and dancing beauties’. As the conversion of women’s attitudes is difficult to evaluate, officials relied on the change of appearance as the evidence of their ‘achievements’. Cadres in Korla city organised an ethnic fashion show and Atlas silk donation events, using beautiful ethnic clothes to contrast with the ‘ugly’ photos of those who wear the jilbab or veil. In the second round of ‘Visit, Benefit and Gather’, cadres carried out over 410 propaganda talks to 35,400 people, and ‘transformed’ 204 women.⁸⁸ Important figures in the community, such as patriotic believers and ‘patriarchs’, were required to provide one-on-one ‘education’ through ‘family meetings’ and ‘clan meetings’. By May 2015, they had visited personnel 1,175 times, and ‘transformed’ 265 people who wore the jilbab or veil.⁸⁹

The Women’s Federation also plays an important role in forging political conformity among women. In April 2017, the XUAR Women’s Federation held a symposium for ethnic women representatives to study the *Ordinances on Counter-radicalisation*. It disseminated an ‘Awakening Letter to Uyghur Compatriots’ for the representatives to sign. Among 120 attendees, 20 women made statements to promise ‘to be grateful to the Party, listen to the Party and follow where the Party leads’.⁹⁰

Under the Mass Line, the public are also given economic or political incentives to participate in counterterrorism intelligence gathering. From March 2014 to August 2018, Beijing police rewarded informants a total of 900,000 Yuan in line with the ‘Measures for Rewarding the Masses for Reporting Terrorism-Related Clues’ issued by the Beijing Public Security

⁸⁷ On the issue of veiling in Xinjiang, see James Leibold and Timothy Grose, ‘Islamic Veiling in Xinjiang: The Political and Societal Struggle to Define Uyghur Female Adornment’, *The China Journal* 76 (2016): 1324–9347.

⁸⁸ Korla City Organisation Department, Korla city “five carry-outs” to promote “counter-radicalisation” work.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Xinjiang Women, Hundreds of women in Xinjiang expressed their will to be beautiful women [新疆百名女声亮做女性], (2017), <http://www.xjwomen.org.cn/2017/0411/841.shtml> (accessed 4.23.19).

Bureau.⁹¹ In April 2016, Xinjiang authorities issued their local version of the *Measures*.⁹² Six months later, six citizens in Xinjiang were reportedly awarded a total of 2.2 million Yuan for providing tip-offs.⁹³ In addition to monetary rewards, the Xinjiang authorities also offer ‘policy rewards’ (*zhengce xing jiangli*), including favourable treatment in job promotions, access to military careers and schooling, social welfare, land contracts and legal aid.⁹⁴

It is important to note that some Chinese cadres and scholars do have criticisms of, or reservations towards, the CCP’s counter-radicalisation strategy. Liu highlighted the lack of ability of those who had been ‘sent down’ to local counter-radicalisation programmes.⁹⁵ Amongst the problems, the lack of language skills is a major obstacle to effective engagement.⁹⁶ Cao observed the excessive intervention by the government in trivial matters such as seed purchasing and the areas in which such seeds could be sown.⁹⁷ Excessive intervention not only increased the workload of the Visit, Benefit and Gather working teams, but may also have resulted in unrealistic expectations among peasants in terms of what the programmes can achieve.⁹⁸ Despite the efforts to localise propaganda strategies discussed earlier, Xu and Hai pointed out that the counter-radicalisation narrative still suffers from a disconnection from the masses, which raises doubts about the feedback function of such an

⁹¹ China News, Beijing police rewarded the masses a total of over 90,000 Yuan for reporting terrorism-related clues [民众□□涉恐涉暴□索 北京警方累□□励 90 余万元], (2018), <http://news.cctv.com/2018/08/17/ARTIcH8XrdVJ1wIGvSWE6AjU180817.shtml> (accessed 4.21.19).

⁹² Public Security Comprehensive Management Office, XUAR Counterterrorism Work Leading Group Office, Measures for rewarding the masses for reporting terrorism-related clues in XUAR [新疆□吾□自治区群众□□涉暴恐犯罪□索□励□法] Xinjiang Social Sciences. (2016), <http://www.xjskw.org.cn/2016/04/12/skwz/6201.html> (accessed 4.21.19).

⁹³ Xinjiang Daily, Six reporters were awarded 2.2 million for providing clues relating to violent terrorist crimes.

⁹⁴ Y. Sui and T. Yao, Xinjiang published Measures to encourage the masses to report terrorism-related clues [新疆出台□法鼓励群众□□涉暴恐犯罪□索], (2016), http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-04/12/content_5063284.htm (accessed 4.23.18).

⁹⁵ W. Liu, Pathways for counter-radicalisation in cultural and ideological realms in Ili village [伊犁□村思想文化□域去极端化路径□□]. *Journal of YiLi Prefecture Communist Party Institute* 1, (2008), p.27.

⁹⁶ Hai, Effect Analysis of “Cadres Station in Villages” Activity in Xinjiang Based on Content Analysis, pp.43; X. Guan, On Problem and Solutions of Implementation of Alternate cadre in Yili of Xinjiang—Based on the smith Policy-Implementation-Processing pattern [新疆伊犁州直“□惠聚”干部住村活□□行□□与□策研究 ——基于史密斯政策□行□程模型□角]. (Xinjiang Agricultural University, 2015), p.41.

⁹⁷ L. Cao, Investigation and reflection on the “counter-radicalisation” governance in South Xinjiang, with reference to Baishitiereke village in Yimamu town, Wushi county [新疆南疆基□□□“去极端化”治理的□□与思考以□什□依麻木□拜什□□克村□个案]. *Seek Truth from Facts*, (2017), <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1003-4641.2017.02.18>.

⁹⁸ Cao, Investigation and reflection on the “counter-radicalisation” governance in South Xinjiang, pp.89

approach.⁹⁹ Furthermore, there is evidence that the Visit, Benefit and Gather cadres were sometimes met with fake loyalty by communities so that they could return to their normal lives after the working teams left.¹⁰⁰ Economic incentives might also result in dependency and conflicts over subsistence allowances.¹⁰¹ The system of Visit, Benefit and Gather is often used as an opportunity to demonstrate ‘achievements’ which can be used for career advancement, and thus creates incentives for cadres to avoid and leave difficult problems to the next working teams.¹⁰² Nevertheless, despite any such limitations, the scale and ethos of the Mass Line programmes suggests that the Chinese state – perhaps uniquely so in terms of scale – has invested very considerable resources in community engagement and mobilisation in the interests of legitimatising its counter-radicalisation policies.

Chinese counter-radicalisation propaganda also demonstrates the relationship between education and indoctrination. Officially framed as ‘propaganda and education’, the mobilisation efforts discussed in this paper highlight the function of feedback, based on the belief that education without feedback is indoctrination. Although by design, the Mass Line campaign set out to collect feedback from the masses, in reality the system that is being implemented in China does not incentivise cadres to prioritise understanding the situation on the ground. The ‘education’ that is being provided features a one-way indoctrination of the ‘good policies’ of the Party, and the ‘feedback’ that is publicly available almost uniformly praises the Party. Such ‘feedback’ is intentionally solicited and selectively reported, if not fabricated, to suit political needs. Without proper feedback, the Mass Line lost its very core, the very ‘magic weapon’ (*fabao*)¹⁰³ designed to ensure the survival of a system in which people’s opinions are uncritically ‘represented’ by the Party. While China’s counter-radicalisation managed to achieve an ostensible success of zero terrorist attack since 2016, the façade of harmony, plurality and democracy celebrated in the numbers of ‘transformed’ individuals might still endanger the survival of the Party. Propaganda and education programmes have engaged communities only superficially, and often prioritise administrative tasks over the quality of public engagement. Thus, such efforts might deprive the Party of the opportunity to identify and address real grievances – a goal the Mass Line sets out to achieve – and the ‘feedback’ collected from this one-way indoctrination can hardly ensure genuine loyalty from the target communities.

Conclusion

⁹⁹ P. Xu. 2017. The Research on Carrying out Ideological and Political Education during Working “FangHuiJu” of Xinjiang [新疆“回惠聚”村工作中的宣思想教育研究]. (Xinjiang Normal University), p.25; Hai, Effect Analysis of “Cadres Station in Villages” Activity in Xinjiang Based on Content Analysis, p.40.

¹⁰⁰ Hai, Effect Analysis of “Cadres Station in Villages” Activity in Xinjiang Based on Content Analysis, p.40

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Guan, On Problem and Solutions of Implementation of Alternate cadre in Yili of Xinjiang, p.42.

¹⁰³ Yuping Han, ‘Reinforce the Foundation of the People’s Armed Forces [夯实人民武装的根基]’, 5 November 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn>.

We have argued that the CCP recognizes the importance of participation and input from the public and uses this engagement as a way of mitigating the more coercive aspects of its centralised governance. However, it remains to be seen to what extent repression can be tempered by mass propaganda campaigns and public engagement. High-pressured control and ideological indoctrination might have short-term effects on reducing terrorist incidents, but they can be the source of further resentment if underlying grievances amongst minorities are left unaddressed, or new ones emerge. Although enormous resources have been poured into local developments together with mass propaganda, it remains unclear whether the blunt indoctrination will translate into long-term loyalty for the regime among Uyghurs. Clearly, a great deal of criticism exists. Nevertheless, despite the limitations that have been observed, and aside from the effectiveness – or otherwise – of the Mass Line ethos, the sheer scale of these activities suggests a number of important conclusions about China’s approach to countering violent extremism.

Firstly, it demonstrates the CCP’s desire to underpin its more coercive policies with a sense of community engagement. This is important because it suggests that China believes that widespread instability or even insurgency is a possible outcome of its counter-terrorism policies, and that the ‘terrorist’ threat in Xinjiang is not confined to an insignificant minority of extremists. Although only a small group of Uyghurs are considered to be hardcore ‘terrorists’, the CCP believes that it is crucial to align the mindset of the entire Uyghur population with the ‘correct’ ideology so that they are not incited by the few. Developments in China’s CVE tactics show increasing reliance on public engagement in counter-terrorism. Within this, the state has made huge efforts to ‘educate’ the people so that they become aware of the value of CCP ideology and national unity. In turn, this suggests that the CCP, contrary to the belief of some observers, does attach importance to the appearance of legitimacy in its security policies. The CCP is not solely engaged in a widespread policy of coercive ‘othering’ or exclusion of ethnic or religious minorities. Actively engaging Uyghurs and influential community members within the political system, the CCP is conscious of how its counter-terrorism policies are viewed by its Uyghur population. Despite the heavy-handed approaches that are well-documented, the Mass Line ethos suggests that the state is primarily interested – however illegitimate its policies may be – in re-educating rather than eliminating ‘deviants’ through counter-radicalisation or prevention, in order to bring people back into the fold of a unified, multi-ethnic Chinese state.

In this context, state restraint and practices of control operate in a different manner in China than in liberal democratic countries, for which the rule of law usually imposes guidelines in terms of how the state may respond to terrorism. In the case of China, restraint comes from a desire to avoid exacerbating political conflict and to mitigate the more coercive aspects of state action, rather than to demonstrate accountability to individual citizens. It also reflects a desire to compel obedience to norms of national identity, when the power of attraction does not suffice, even though enforced compliance is framed as a restorative act in the interests of unity in line with a historical pattern of dealing with perceived dissent. In order to maintain stability (*weihu wending*), the CCP does not hesitate to pour resources into programmes

aimed at channelling public sentiment (*yuqing*) away from discontent with the government. The ability of the local governments to conform to the central authorities' expectations and implement counter-radicalisation policies at such a scale also differentiates China's counter-radicalisation propaganda from most liberal democracies' narrative control. Although some of the claims relating to the scale of the programmes may be exaggerated, it is clear that the CCP relies on propaganda and mass engagement to guide how ordinary citizens think of state policies. China's hearts and minds campaign not only aims at 'full coverage' in terms of the scale, but also 'into the hearts and into the minds' in terms of the effect. Repeated propaganda programmes ensure that citizens not only hear what the government is saying, but also internalise those messages 'until they embrace them as their own'.¹⁰⁴ The efforts to ensure the effect of propaganda indicate that the CCP attaches great importance to the legitimacy of its counter-terrorism practices in the eyes of local citizens.

Secondly, China's approach to countering 'violent extremism' reflects historical continuities in the country's political culture. The CCP has relied on mass mobilisation to legitimise its 'democratic dictatorship', and this has been a constant theme across a number of national campaigns. From the founding of the Party in 1921 through to the present, the CCP has developed its mass mobilisation tactics to deal with both internal and external security challenges. China's approach to countering violent extremism builds on its past experience in identifying and dealing with the 'enemies within', and draws lessons from past political struggles in terms of co-opting sections of the targeted community. The ways in which the discourse about 'enemies' is constructed reflects a key component of the political milieu – distinguishing between 'friends' and 'enemies'.¹⁰⁵ China's political identity – and to some extent its ontological security – relies on the 'threat' of its enemies. These used to be 'class enemies', such as landlords and the 'rightists' in the early years of the People's Republic of China. In contemporary China, although the 'class' element of the friend-enemy binary has been downplayed since the economic reform in 1987, anxiety about the imperialist, capitalist and hegemonic 'others' has never been fully brushed aside. The manner in which counter-radicalisation embraces the vision of a unified, national project, constantly pushing back against foreign interference, where all but the worst miscreants can be 'saved', resonates with the CCP's revolutionary ethos in historical perspective. Cases of democratisation in other parts of the world have convinced the CCP of the need to keep the loyalty of the key population – the majority of Uyghurs in this case. Associating human rights advocates with foreign intervention, the CCP's narrative is to link domestic separatist movements with a hegemonic agenda of the West aimed at containing the rise of China, and sees vulnerable citizens as easy targets for the 'hostile international forces'. This rationale underpins the initiatives to 'educate' the masses so that they remain loyal to the regime and to the state.

¹⁰⁴ Mao, *Selected works of Mao Zedong (Vol 3)*, p.899.

¹⁰⁵ J. Huysmans, Security! What Do You Mean?: From Concept to Thick Signifier. *European Journal of International Relations* 4, (1998), pp.226–255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066198004002004>; Schmitt, C., The concept of the political: Expanded edition, in: Schwab, G. (Tran.), *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition*. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Third, this study also suggests that there may be some similarities between China's authoritarian approach and the approach of powerful liberal states in terms of the adoption of extraordinary measures to counter violent extremism. The discourse of terrorism as an existential threat gives rise to a need for exceptional measures and enables states to circumvent some of the legal obligations that protect citizens against human rights violations.¹⁰⁶ For authoritarian states and liberal democracies alike, the discourse of terrorism justifies highly securitized counter-terrorism and CVE with reference to national security. Furthermore, counter-terrorism operations require a level of secrecy which makes it difficult to demonstrate accountability, proportionality and legal due process.¹⁰⁷ This leaves the door open for abuses of power and the circumvention of the rule of law which is – in theory – what distinguishes liberal democracies from authoritarian regimes, although the distinction may not be as clear-cut as is generally assumed. A further similarity between China and more liberal states – with an obvious comparison to the UK's 'Prevent' counter-radicalisation programme – is to see the threat of extremism as a challenge of alienation requiring the promotion of social cohesion and citizenship. The discourse surrounding 'Prevent' and community cohesion policies are closely intertwined and underpinned by the concern that those who live differently, especially Muslims, are more likely to be radicalised, warranting extra attention to their loyalty.¹⁰⁸

Finally, China's attempts to legitimise its approach to counter-terrorism reflects an evolution from a unitary, indiscriminate propaganda programme to an all-encompassing, situation-tailored strategy. The 'Visit, Benefit and Gather' programme was initially designed as a three-year programme focusing on economic development in the underdeveloped regions in Xinjiang. Throughout this time it evolved into an integral part of the long-term mass propaganda campaign accompanying counter-terrorism policies. As it unfolded, it moved away from a top-down, centralised and organised programme. Local cadres and news agencies have played an important role in shaping the criteria by which to gauge the success of ideological indoctrination. From the 'flood irrigation' to the 'drip irrigation' model, the emphasis on the role of women, and the penetration of propaganda into cultural activities, it is clear that lower-level technocrats have tailored the state-led counter-terrorism Mass Line campaign to fit local conditions. These developments highlight the importance of understanding China's counter-terrorism approach beyond the model of a fixed authoritarian state programme that is carried out precisely as the state had planned.

¹⁰⁶ M. Nowak and A. Charbord (Eds.), *Using human rights to counter terrorism*, Elgar studies in human rights. (Cheltenham, UK Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018). On the same topic in the Chinese context, see Zunyou Zhou, "'Fighting Terrorism According to Law": China's Legal Efforts against Terrorism', in *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China: Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions*, ed. Michael E Clarke (London: Hurst, 2018), 75–98.

¹⁰⁷ Chi Zhang, 'The Double Track System of Terrorism Proscription in China', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 5 February 2019, 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1549547>, p.2

¹⁰⁸ Charles Husband and Yunis Alam, *Social Cohesion and Counter-Terrorism: A Policy Contradiction?* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2011).

Note: Translation of Chinese language sources has been undertaken by the authors.