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Talking Past Each Other: Chinese and Western Discourses on Ethnic Conflict

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Abstract

When violent ethnic conflict erupted in Xinjiang in July 2009, the official Chinese media and most Western news outlets agreed on many basic facts, but contextualized those facts within contrasting discourses. The Chinese media reasserted the established Party line on Xinjiang in discourses that served both domestic and diplomatic purposes. Western accounts, by contrast, were influenced by discourses linked to the West's self-image and world view. This paper will discuss both Chinese and Western public discourses on the riots, and it will make some suggestions about their relationship to opinion beyond the political and media elites.

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1. Introduction

On the afternoon of Sunday 5 July 2009 a Uighur mob in the Xinjiang capital of Urumqi went on the rampage, bashing and killing Han Chinese and destroying property well into the night. The police eventually contained the riot, and they also brought Han counter-attacks under control. In the weeks after the riot, some of those who had been severely injured died, and by 4 August the death toll stood at 197. In both China and the West there was widespread agreement on these basic facts. However, leaders and news outlets in both China and the West

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interpreted the facts very differently, with both sides embedding them in discourses that revealed long-standing differences in values, perspectives and strategic interests. In this paper I will analyse and explain these contrasting discourses, outlining their purposes, linking them to their contexts, and discussing their relationship to the views of ordinary people.

2. Chinese official discourse on the riot

Current Chinese policies surrounding the regulation of discourse combine legacies of the Maoist past with changes introduced during the Reform Era that began in 1978. The most important change is that the Party has quietly abandoned Mao's totalitarian goal of trying to remake people's minds by forcing them to speak an Orwellian language based on revolutionary slogans and scripts (Ji, 2004). Amongst friends people now say pretty much what they think, and they are no longer made to integrate political scripts and revolutionary slogans into their conversations. There is also a flourishing private sector, sub-cultures have begun to develop, and public discourses have emerged that are largely uncontrolled by the state. So China is no longer a totalitarian society that speaks a single totalitarian language. It still, however, a society in which the Party-state owns all television stations through national, provincial or city authorities, and in which media organizations linked to official publications run most newspapers and magazines. Media outlets have to be licensed, and the Propaganda Department supervises the content of all print media, radio and television. Internet news services, internet bulletin boards, blogs and email are all monitored. Even Yahoo and Google have to cooperate with the system on pain of exclusion from the Chinese market. And finally, on issues that the Party deems crucial to the national interest or its own interests, the media has to report and support the official line (Ji, 2011).

This explains the nature of the Chinese media's response to events like protests in Tibet and the Urumqi riot. Together, these regions constitute a third of China's land mass, and there are vital interests at stake. In the case of Xinjiang, the territory's value is enhanced by the fact that it has large iron ore deposits, 38 percent of the country's coal and over 25 percent of its oil and natural gas (China. Org, 2014). It is also the gateway to Central Asia, where China's thirst for oil, natural gas and minerals has made it the largest trading partner of four of the region's five former Soviet republics (The Economist, 2013). So Uighur separatism in Xinjiang threatens vital Chinese interests, and the government treats it as a topic that is simply not up for debate. Under these circumstances the role of the Chinese media is simply to report statements by Party leaders, print official news releases, and follow the Party line.

What, then, was the Party line on the Urumqi riots? There were four principal discourses: that is, there were four habitual and stereotypical ways of talking about the riot— four recurrent ways of describing, explaining or contextualising it:

- *The discourse against violence and criminal illegality.* On 8 July, the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party called the riot a 'serious crime' and declared that 'Instigators, organizers, culprits and violent criminals in the unrest shall be severely punished in accordance with the law' (Xinhua 2009b). This statement, and many others like it, drew on the increasingly important discourse about the rule of law in China. This discourse is invoked by all governments confronted with deadly riots because it justifies the use of strong measures, it sets the scene for the punishment of offenders, and it resonates strongly with ordinary people who fear violence and disorder.
- *The discourse against separatism, terrorism and extremism.* In its meeting of 8 July, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee stated that the violence in Urumqi was masterminded by the 'three forces' of terrorism, separatism and extremism at home and abroad (Xinhua, 2009b). Its accusations were directed at the Washington-based World Uighur Council (WUC), headed by Rebiya Kadeer, which it accused of instigating the riot to stir up ethnic hatred, destroy China's national unity and serve its agenda of creating an independent 'East Turkestan'. It supported the charge with evidence that the WUC knew that a protest was being planned and that it may have helped to organise it (China Daily, 2009b). The evidence fell short of showing that the WUC instigated the violence, but the Chinese government wanted to blame the WUC because it was the international voice of Uighur separatism and was funded by the United States Congress through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED, 2009). China knew that if it could link the WUC to terroristic violence it might be able to get it listed as a banned terrorist group, forcing the Americans to cut off their support.

- *The discourse on 'maintaining ethnic unity, building harmonious Xinjiang'.* The meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee on 8 July reaffirmed the principle that 'the Han ethnic group cannot be separated from minorities, minorities cannot do without the Han and minority groups also cannot do without each other'; and it called for 'holding high the banner of ethnic unity' and carrying on the tradition that people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang 'breathe together, share the same destiny and have their hearts linked to each other' (Xinhua, 2009b). This message was repeated time and again on official websites, through official statements, and through posters and video footage featuring Uighurs and Han working and living together in harmony. The media reinforced the message by carrying stories about Uighurs who had sheltered or protected Han during the riot. This discourse was intended both to undermine Uighur separatism and to protect Uighurs from retaliation by Han who were outraged by the riot. It drew on a well-established trope in official Party discourse that overlooked evidence of ethnic friction and constructed a pleasing fantasy in which China's 56 nationalities were a big, happy family living together in perfect harmony (Gladney, 1994).
- *The discourse on government assistance to the Uighurs.* This discourse has its origins in the fact that China, while not tolerating separatism or challenges to the Communist Party's authority, has a strong record on ethnic rights. This includes its ethnically based policy of regional autonomy, policies of reverse discrimination in university entry and employment, and the exemption of minorities from the one-child policy (Sautman, 2010). The government also stresses that Xinjiang has benefited from China's policies of development, which advance a category of rights generally overlooked by Western critics—the 'people's rights to existence and development' (Information Office of the State Council, 2009). This discourse on government assistance is used to counter Western claims that Uighur protest is a response to government policies of ethnic oppression or neglect.

Did most people in China agree with the perspective on the riot expressed in these four official discourses? It is not hard to give an approximate answer to this question. We can certainly say, for example, that while the 'discourse against violence and criminal illegality' may have dismayed Uighurs who felt that they were the victims of a heavy handed crackdown, it was endorsed by most Han Chinese. Memories of the chaos and violence of the Cultural Revolution have produced a deep aversion to disorder, and most people were appalled by the scenes that they saw on their television screens.

There is little doubt, either, that the 'discourse against separatism, terrorism and extremism' was also widely endorsed. On the internet and in person, most Chinese vehemently support their country's claim to the outlying regions of Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan. In part, this is because after the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 the government launched a sustained campaign to encourage nationalist feeling—a campaign built around a discourse in which the Communist Party stars as the guarantor of national unity (Zhao, 2004). The resulting nationalist movement has developed its own momentum, with protestors and 'netizens' sometimes going even further than the authorities wish in attacking Japan and other countries that oppose China's claims (Gries 2004; Shirk 2008).

While nearly all China's Han people agree that 'maintaining ethnic unity' and building a 'harmonious Xinjiang' is a noble ideal, we can also say that the riots have helped to undermine that ideal by strengthening unfavourable stereotypes of the Uighurs. Many people think that the Uighurs are backward, and that their menfolk are rugged types who all too often have links to criminal activity and carry knives (Palmer, 2013). In the wake of the riots this stereotype naturally became more rigid. Moreover, as Barry Sautman notes, 'Popular Han resentment of minorities became more vocal, especially on the internet, with complaints that minorities are ungrateful and that leniency towards them spurs separatism and ethnic murder' (Sautman 2010). So the consensus in favour of programmes linked to the 'discourse on government assistance to the Uighurs' has evaporated. In particular, the policies of ethnic autonomy and reverse discrimination that have benefited minorities are now under attack in internet forums and amongst academic and policy making elites (Sautman 2010). These policies are not seen as crucial either to China's security or to the Communist Party's rule, so they can be debated. China may be an authoritarian society, but it is no longer a totalitarian one, and on some issues public debates have the potential to contribute to a change in policies and a shift in official discourse.

3. Western reports and discourses on the riots

When riots broke out in Tibet in 2008, the Chinese government made the mistake of restricting access to the

international media. This led Western news outlets to attack the restrictions on freedom of expression, it created the impression that China had something to hide, and it led to a news vacuum that was filled by unreliable reports, some many from Tibetan exiles linked to the Dalai Lama. Western reporting was therefore markedly unsympathetic to the Chinese position, and some of it was error-ridden and distorted.

When riots erupted in Urumqi the following year, the government decided on a change of policy. Believing that it had nothing to hide and determined not to let the ‘Chinese crackdown on media coverage’ again become the issue, it brought the foreign press to Xinjiang and gave it freedom to report what it saw. It also knew that if the international media were invited to Xinjiang, they would be constantly exposed to the Chinese government’s message and would be less reliant on press releases put out by the WUC. So within two days China was hosting some 150 foreign reporters from more than 80 media organisations in Urumqi.

The new strategy brought significant gains. Western print, television and internet media carried widely-read reports, pictures and video footage of the violence and, as far as the basic facts were concerned, generally confirmed the official Chinese account. It also became clear that if Western journalists had been unable to check things out for themselves, this would not have happened. As the *Daily Telegraph*’s Peter Foster explained, the foreign journalists who travelled to Urumqi had at first assumed ‘that most of the 156 victims of [the] riot were Uighurs’ who ‘had been killed by security forces’. However, the journalists changed their minds because ‘very few witnesses reported that the police had opened fire’, and most testified that the police had used ‘batons, electric prods and tear gas and other non-lethal methods to disperse the riot.’ The journalists also asked ‘why, if security forces had been responsible for the bulk of the deaths, would China be facilitating such unprecedented access to hospitals, holding press conferences ... and allowing reporters to tour the city?’ (Foster, 2009; Ford, 2009). As a result, they and their newspapers came to accept official Chinese estimates of the number and ethnicity of the victims, effectively dismissing the World Uighur Congress’s claim that thousands of Uighurs had been killed by the police. Moreover, they gave no support to the Turkish Prime Minister’s accusation that the Chinese government had failed to stop Han attacks on Uighurs that were akin to ‘genocide’. So China’s experiment with an ‘open’ media policy helped the Western world to get some basic facts straight, and in that sense it was a success. At the end of July the director of the State Council Information Office acknowledged this, saying that the policy had been ‘beneficial’ and had ‘demonstrated the country’s democratic progress and confidence’ (Xinhua, 2009a).

What did the Western media think their job was? Overwhelmingly, they saw it as satisfying their audiences’ desire for ‘news’ with stories enlivened with their own observations, quotations from witnesses, and poignant details about the riot’s victims. They also, in varying degrees, thought that they should help their audiences actually to *understand* what was going on by providing background information. However, although most Western journalists no doubt saw themselves as simply ‘reporting the facts’, it soon became apparent that a good deal of the reporting, background analysis and sub-editing was shaped by discourses linked to the Western self-image and world view, and that these discourses gave a systematic slant to much of the coverage.

When the media present an analysis or report an event, they have to adapt what they say to the interests, preconceptions, and understanding of their audience (Bauer, 1964; Bauer & Zimmerman, 1956). This often involves tailoring their message to their audience’s existing, underlying discourses—their audience’s habitual and stereotypical ways of thinking and talking about particular aspects of the world. One reason they do this is that by linking a report to established discourses they place it in the context of familiar facts, familiar ideas and familiar ways of thinking. People can then understand it in relation to what they already know, or think they know. It is good communication and good business: people like media reports that leave them with the feeling that they understand what is going on, and this makes them more likely to become regular readers, listeners or viewers.

Another reason why the media attempt to link news to their audience’s existing discourses arises from the fact that discourses are a shared linguistic experience. It is through discourses that we build group identity—our identity as people who talk and think about the world in ways that make us different from, and perhaps superior to, people who talk about the world in other ways. All good communicators, including media people, have at least an intuitive understanding of this. They link what they say to the discourses of their target audience, forging a bond with that audience and becoming part of a single discourse community that makes its members feel good by endorsing their values and world-view. And, by giving their audiences the discourses that they want, they win their loyalty.

This helps us to understand what a good many Western journalists and sub-editors were doing when they covered the Xinjiang riots. They were not just reporting, but they were systematically selecting and framing information so that they could use it within three discourses that are part of the modern Western self-image and modern Western culture: the discourse on human rights, the discourse on communist oppression, and the discourse on indigenous

rights.

The discourse on human rights has been around since the eighteenth century, but it began to achieve its current importance only after World War II, when world leaders promoted it in the hope that it could prevent any repetition of the terrible things that Nazi Germany had done (Hunt, 2007). Its importance was consolidated during the four decades and more of the Cold War, when Western governments used it as a weapon to launch repeated attacks on communist states for abuses of human rights. It was during this period that people in Western nations began to identify ‘the West’ collectively as the chief defender of human rights. It was during this period, too, that they began to attribute enormous importance to a complementary discourse—the discourse on communist oppression. Together, these two discourses were used to define the Cold War as essentially a conflict between the human rights-loving West and the oppressive communist ‘Other’ (Connolly, 2014).

The discourse on ethnic rights was slower to develop in the West, which lagged well behind the leading communist states in giving recognition to the collective rights of indigenous and ethnic minorities. In the Soviet Union, despite setbacks in the 1930s and 1940s, the main nationalities had from the beginning enjoyed recognition and partial regional autonomy within the country’s constituent republics. Similarly, as far back as the 1930s the Chinese Communist Party had rallied the minorities’ support with promises of ethnic regional autonomy, then put them into practice after it won power in 1949 (Sautman, 1999). In the West, by contrast, indigenous rights were taken up, belatedly and slowly, only from the 1960s, because decolonization had at last been enforced on the Western imperialist powers, because a non-white majority had emerged in the United Nations General Assembly, and because civil rights movements had developed amongst indigenous minorities in some leading Western countries. The stage was then set for a younger generation of Westerners to adjust to this new, postcolonial order by reacting against their own countries’ imperialist and racist pasts—identifying themselves with indigenous rights, anti-colonialism, and post-colonial causes. In this context the complaints of Tibetan and Uighur separatists, living in exile in the West, gained widespread support, especially since the authoritarian style of China’s communist government made it a popular target and created an overlap between the discourse on ethnic rights and the discourses on communist oppression and human rights (Connolly, 2014).

The discourses on human rights, communist oppression and indigenous rights had a profound influence on the Western media’s handling of the Xinjiang riots. When riots occur in the West, as they did in France in 2005 or in Greece in 2008, the reporting focuses on the riots, not on the attempts to contain them. In the case of the Xinjiang riots, by contrast, the emphasis was often as much on the ‘heavy-handed’ crackdown as on the riots themselves. Most notoriously, the *London Evening Standard*’s website reported a clash between the police and Uighur women under the title ‘The women invoking Tiananmen’s spirit’, illustrating it with a photo of bleeding women comforting each other ‘after being attacked by police’. However, it was soon revealed that the women in the photos were not Uighurs, but Han, and that they had been bashed by Uighurs, not the police. This was a journalistic disaster, indefensible by the standards of Western journalism or indeed any standards, and the paper took it off the website when the error was pointed out. The debacle was caused by a sub-editor, perhaps with an ideological agenda, who took the picture from an Associated Press feed and assumed that the women were Uighurs who could be used to make the required political point (Schiller, 2009).

The *London Evening Standard*’s gaffe was only the most spectacular result of the lingering preconception, at least amongst uninformed sub-editors, that the Chinese police were the oppressors and the Uighurs their victims. *The Guardian*—a far better newspaper than the *Standard*—somehow ran a competent story by Tania Brannigan under the headline ‘Uighurs Cling to Life in People’s Hospital as China’s Wounds Weep’, although the story itself reported that only 39 of the 291 victims in the hospital were Uighurs (Brannigan, 2009). Again, a sub-editor seems to have been responsible, because the same story appeared with a more accurate headline in another newspaper (Brannigan, 2009a). Even *The Economist* was let down by a sub-editor who decorated a good article with the sub-heading ‘Racial killings and heavy-handed policing stir up a repressed and dangerous province’, as if the strong police response was what had stirred up the disorder and not what stopped it. The same sub-editor doubled the offence by pinning the caption ‘How Hans dominate these days’ to a picture of angry Han men throwing stones—implying that the Han were now dominating the Uighurs by violence (*The Economist*, 2009).

More generally, there were many stories that emphasised and implicitly condemned ‘heavy-handed policing’—stories that seemed reluctant to admit that a strong police presence was necessary to prevent further violence. Perhaps the most startling was a report by Australia’s ABC—the government-owned but independent Australian Broadcasting Corporation. It was headed ‘Urumqi violence sparks worldwide anger’, and it reported that ‘protestors have demonstrated against the unrest in China in cities across the world’ (ABC, 2009). The ‘violence’ and ‘unrest’

that it had in mind, however, were not the violence and unrest associated with the riot, but the violence and unrest associated with the Chinese government's *suppression* of the riot. The 'worldwide anger' at the suppression of the riot was in fact represented only by Rebiya Kadeer (with her claim that the government may have killed thousands of Uighurs), the Turkish Prime Minister (with his talk of 'genocide' against the Uighurs), the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (which called the government's use of force 'disproportionate'), and Uighurs who staged protests in Turkey and three Western cities. In short, the report took the views of the Chinese government's most extreme *Muslim* critics and tried to pass them off as 'world' opinion.

This particular news item was unprofessional and flagrantly biased, but to many people in China it seemed that bias characterised the Western media as a whole. They were particularly upset at the widespread publicity given to the views of Rebiya Kadeer and the World Uighur Congress—the very people whom the Chinese authorities and many ordinary Chinese accused of masterminding the riot. *The Times* of London and *The Wall Street Journal Asia* both carried 'opinion pieces' by Kadeer blaming the riot on Chinese oppression of the Uighurs (Kadeer, 2009a). This was in line with the common journalistic practice of offering a forum to a variety of views. However, the *Journal* went further by advancing a more moderate version of the same argument in an editorial. This seemed to place the newspaper squarely in Kadeer's camp, and to a degree it did, although the paper did not endorse her separatism or her more extreme statements. Its analysis overlapped with hers because it was influenced by the Western discourses on human rights, ethnic rights and communist oppression to which Kadeer so skilfully appealed, and because it was based on the widespread assumption that ethnic grievances resulting from oppressive policies *had* to be the underlying cause of unrest in Xinjiang.

The discourse on communist oppression also influenced the way in which *The Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and other media outlets reported the fact that the Chinese authorities had blocked internet sites that were reporting on the riot or discussing it. They treated the blocking, overwhelmingly, as an example of the usual heavy-handed response to be expected from the Chinese Communist Party, or even as an indication that the Party was looking for an excuse to crack down on the internet. Only a few reports gave any credit to the very plausible official explanation of the blocking: that it was an attempt to stop the spread of destabilising rumours and to prevent use of the internet to organise further disturbances.

However, the voices of Western opinion that were most obviously affected by the discourse on communist oppression were not, in fact, those of the journalists, but those of Western political leaders—a group whose members court popularity by trying to align themselves with dominant discourses whenever they can. The standard response to the riot on the part of Western leaders was not, as many Chinese might have hoped, a statement supporting the attempts of the Chinese government to restore order. It was not even a statement of support for those attempts, qualified by the hope that force would be kept to a minimum. Instead, from Barack Obama's administration down, almost every Western government treated the Chinese government and the rioters as morally equivalent and called for BOTH sides to exercise restraint. Obama's press secretary, Robert Gibbs said that the administration was 'deeply concerned' at the violence and that 'We call on all in Xinjiang to exercise restraint.' The president of the European Union said that 'The EU calls for restraint on all sides and for the situation to be resolved peacefully.' A spokesman for the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, said 'we would urge restraint on all sides and, where possible, for problems to be resolved through dialogue'. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said 'There has been a lot of violence and restraint is now required on the part of all parties.' Finally, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that 'all differences of opinion must be resolved peacefully through dialogue', and that the 'Governments concerned must also exercise extreme care and take necessary measures to protect the life and safety of the civilian population and their citizens and their properties, and protect freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of information.' (Agence France Press, 2009; *Brunei Times*, 2009). All of these statements implied that the Chinese government was as much in need of warning and restraint as the perpetrators of a deadly riot. The statements also made it clear that, within the dominant discourses of the West, no political leader could openly support the use of force by a communist government even when force was required to stop the killing of innocent people. With respect to China, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Western assumptions born during the Cold War were still entrenched.

4. Conclusion and prospects

Both Chinese and Western responses to the violence in Urumqi were, for the most part, predictable, framed within existing discourses. The official Chinese response was embedded in established discourses that justified the

government's policies in Xinjiang to the Chinese public and the wider world, while much Western reporting and commentary drew on pre-existing discourses about human rights, communist oppression, and indigenous rights. These Western discourses underpinned explanations of the violence, they were invoked to criticize Chinese policies, and they reinforced the West's favourable self-image. So both Western and Chinese discourses were, in part, exercises in self-justification.

In the longer term, however, there is reason to hope. In China, we have seen, there is now public debate about at least one discourse that was used to justify the government's response to the Kunming riots, so there is the unusual prospect of a change in official discourse emerging from the bottom up. And in the West, careful and intelligent reporting by some of the journalists in Urumqi showed that it was possible to challenge deeply entrenched assumptions without losing the target audience. The *Daily Telegraph*'s Peter Foster, we have seen, took his readers on a journey of discovery as he investigated (and eventually rejected) his own initial assumption that most victims of the violence must have been Uighurs. He also challenged the standard discourse about 'heavy-handed policing' with a skilled analysis of the response of the Chinese police to a succession of very difficult situations. His conclusion was that while the police failed to anticipate the outbreak of mass violence, they had to be given 'huge credit' for the way in which they defused subsequent Uighur protests and controlled Han mobs bent on revenge (Foster, 2009a).

Even the politicians are showing signs of being more willing to depart from established scripts in responding to events in China. This became apparent in the aftermath of the attack by eight knife-wielding Uighurs at a railway station in Kunming on 1 March 2014—an attack that killed 29 people and injured over 140 others. China reported that the attackers were Uighurs and said that it was a terrorist attack. The United Nations Security Council then reacted promptly, calling it 'a most heinous terrorist attack', while a spokesman for the European Union's foreign minister said 'There is never any justification for such heinous crimes' (Xinhua, 2014). The United States was slow to respond, and at first it seemed that it would continue its customary reluctance to use the word 'terrorism' in relation to events in China. However, under persistent questioning, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki conceded that 'based on the information reported by the Chinese media, this appears to be an act of terrorism, targeting random members of the public. So we are calling this an act of terrorism.' She added that the United States opposed terrorism 'in all its forms' (Tatlow, 2014). Even the Foreign Ministry of Turkey, a country whose prime minister had accused China of allowing 'genocide' in Urumqi in 2009, condemned the Kunming massacre as a terrorist attack and extended condolences to the victims and their families (Global Times 2014). Not a single country called for 'restraint on both sides'. The world is slowly adjusting its language to accommodate the rise of a new economic superpower, and even deeply entrenched discourses are increasingly being sidelined.

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