Chapter 3

Material Politics, Violence, and Religion
A Comparative Study of Islam and Buddhism in the People’s Republic of China

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1 Introduction

In China there are five official or “legal” religions according to a classification scheme which is introduced in the early 20th century (Goossaert 2005): “Catholicism”, “Protestantism”, “Buddhism”, “Daoism”, and “Islam”. The concept of ‘religion’ (宗教 zōng jiào) was adopted from the Japanese word for it. Of those five religions, only one finds its origins in China, namely Daoism. This veil of legal equality hides that the dealing of the PRC1 government with these religions is very different. While ‘Buddhism’ as a socio-religious structure benefits most from this classification, it has become abundantly clear that ‘Islam’ is more and more becoming a target for the authorities. This however should not be understood as a failure to recognize that Buddhism too, especially in Tibet and Inner Mongolia, has suffered from state control and religious persecution.

I align myself with a group of scholars that is critical on what is called the ‘world religions paradigm’ (cf. Hedges 2017; Masuzawa 2012) in which religious diversity is primarily studied from the perspective of supposedly enclosed, immutable systems of belief. In my earlier work, I have proposed to look at religion more as a rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Braidotti 2011), as interconnected cultural structures rather than various ‘traditions’ (Oostveen 2019, 2020). In the case of China, this becomes especially important: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the socialist PRC are not only nominally atheist, but also have a history of religious persecution, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Whereas a sanctified class of ‘religions’ might be an innocent though flawed tool of classification for a scholar, in the hands of a repressive government the stakes become much higher.

1 I avoid referring to the PRC as ‘China’. By doing this, I do not want to delegitimize the regime of the CCP on the Mainland territories of China, but I do want to emphasize its contingent nature. And, also, we should not forget that the Republic of China (‘Taiwan’) still officially makes the claim of being the sole representative authority of ‘China’ as well.
In the PRC, religious politics has taken the shape of material politics. In this article, I employ the terms or concepts ‘Islam’ and ‘Buddhism’ explicitly as embedded in the discursive framework of the ‘Chinese Dream’, and show how this ‘comes to matter’. This means that I study these terms through the lens of the PRC authorities as constructed entities to both encapsulate and control them. This way they borrow from the world religions paradigm in order to outwardly promote an image of religious tolerance and freedom, while simultaneously fully employing the disciplining potential of the world religions paradigm. Since, however, the world religions paradigm emphasizes religions as ‘systems of faith’, religious communities do have possibilities to avoid certain forms of control, by developing material infrastructures that cannot be grasped by the bureaucratic state. Let me define rhizomatic religion as the ‘naturally’, non-official occurring social phenomena we as scholars have learned to call ‘religious’ in their horizontal, interconnected, expressions. This includes ‘folk religion’, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), as well as the culturally embedded practice of ancestor worship, and shamanism, next to the diversity of religious expressions which are commonly clustered as part of the ‘world religions’. This definition is partly self-referential: I believe no definition of religion can escape the fact that religion is always also a contingent discursive reality. ‘Religion’ as a concept could be understood as a ‘hauntology’ (Derrida 1994) – a discursive ghost that we are unable to discard completely. Rhizomatic religion refers to localized material assemblages and events, with cultural references to other such events in order to establish imagined worlds, as well as relationships with those worlds. While religious studies have often focused on texts and beliefs as primary loci of interest, the approach to religion as rhizomatic is emphasizing the material reality and dimension of religious phenomena. Chinese religion, both rhizomatic religion in China as well as state-sanctioned religion, expresses itself by means of its edifices: religious temples construct cities and environments. Monasteries and Buddhist schools can emerge as publicly funded institutions, which connect networks of official religion and give it its legitimacy. But monasteries can also emerge as shanty towns on the outskirts of the developed Han Chinese world (Oostveen 2020a). The best example of the repression of Islam in China is the material politics towards the allowed external appearance of mosques in the public space. And, of course, the infamous re-education camps of Xinjiang emerge as the dark side of anti-religious material culture.

Currently, the PRC is in the process of consciously reimagining its view on its place in the world and projecting this vision on the rest of the world. ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ – or ‘Xiism’ – is the most poignant example of this. My aim is to show how the PRC attempts to gain cultural hegemony over the religious
diversity in China, in order to incorporate it under this new worldview. Chinese religions, Protestantism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Buddhism are renegotiated under Xiism, which becomes a sort of “civil religion” in China (cf. Bellah 1967), similar to Maoism before. The PRC attempts this by gaining control over the religious infrastructure in China and defining how this infrastructure encodes religious realities.

2 Religion in China

In this article, I compare the material politics towards Buddhism and towards Islam in the contemporary PRC. To understand the relative positions of these two ‘religions’ in Chinese society, I would first look at their history. Buddhists arrived in China for the first time in the 1st century CE (Zürcher 1959) and were able to have a lasting influence on its culture. The teaching of Buddha (佛教 fó jiào) became regarded in the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) as one of the ‘Three Teachings’ of China, together with the teaching of the classics (儒教 rú jiào – normally understood as ‘Confucianism’) and the teaching of the Way (道教 dào jiào – or ‘Daoism’). Islam arrived in China only a few centuries later but might not have gone through the same process of nativization that makes outside observers think of Islam as ‘Chinese’ in the same way as Western observers think of Buddhism as ‘Chinese’. Given the long history of Islam in China however and considering the transformation it underwent in a way that did generate a form of native Chinese Islam, this should be considered as unjustified. Nevertheless, we also must take it as a discursive fact that ‘Islam’ has at the same time remained ‘foreign’ to Chinese culture, at least in how it is perceived both by Chinese observers as well as Western, while ‘Buddhism’ has not.

Another important element of the self-understanding of Chinese cultural diversity is the concept of ‘mín zú’ 民族, or ‘minorities’. According to this ethnologic ‘dogma’, the ‘Chinese nation’ is constituted of 56 different ethnic groups. The largest of these groups are the Han Chinese (about 91%), while the 55 other ‘mín zú’ make up the rest. Religion is to an extent legitimized by the Chinese government as part of the culture of these Chinese minorities. The cultural diversity of the Chinese should, under the guidance of socialism,

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2 The earliest differentiation between the three teachings could be attested to the Buddhist monk Huiyuan (334–416 CE). By the time of the Tang dynasty, this differentiation was firmly entrenched in the Chinese mind (Oostveen 2020b).
be protected and defended. It is therefore, for example, that Tibetan culture is both repressed and supported: the PRC does not understand Tibetans as inferior to Chinese, because they are Chinese. Therefore, Tibetan Buddhism is also to be ‘protected’, be it not under the guidance of the Dalai Lama.

The *mín zú* analysis becomes also important when we will consider Islam. Uyghurs and Hui are seen as two of these 55 minorities. In the case of the Hui, we could argue that this group is predominantly defined by their Muslimness, despite being ethnically close to the Han Chinese. In the case of the Uyghur, their ethnic affiliation appears closer to Turkic people of central Asia (Gladney 2003). But it is the *mín zú* framework which subsumes them under the cultural construct of the Chinese nation. Islam, in their case, is not which sets them apart as another *mín zú* (as is the case with the Hui) but is a cultural trait in the same way as Inner Mongolians are (Vajrayana) Buddhists.

The study of contemporary religion in China, and the study of Islam *a fortiori*, has over the past decades increasingly become a locus of an epistemological rift between Western ‘critique’ of PRC policy in Hui and Uyghur territories in China, and the ‘Chinese perspective’, which has generally retreated from studying Islam in China (unofficially making it a ‘sensitive topic’). While earlier there might have been more overlapping interests between Western and Chinese scholars in studying religion in China, today the political assumptions behind such research are increasingly diverging. Scholars of religion in China are more and more confronted with the dilemma to what extent they take position. On the one hand, there is a trend to defend PRC policies in Uyghur Xinjiang or denying the existence of genocidal policies. The ‘Cross Cultural Human Rights Centre’, for example, proposes an alternative framework of human rights, which are not influenced by ‘Western misunderstandings’ of China (Hampden et al. 2021). The underlying discourse is that human rights are defined by a Western biased negative view on China, and that by developing ‘cross cultural human rights’, in which we acquire understanding of the Chinese point of view, we will understand that the policies in Xinjiang are actually strengthening human rights, instead of undermining it. At the other end of the spectrum, some scholars completely identify with the rising anti-

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3 I would like to thank my student IJsbrandt van Liere for bringing this article to my attention.
4 While I was writing this article, the “Cross Cultural Human Rights Centre” at the Free University of Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam) came under attack from public indignation, after an investigation of the NOS (Nederlandse Omroep Stichting) showed that the center had been financed directly by the Chinese government for years. This was particularly embarrassing given the Xinjiang genocide negationist remarks of some of the members of this center. VU Amsterdam decided to dismantle the center after the public outcry.
China sentiment (Normile 2019). I believe that it is important to speak out, also as a scholar, if atrocities are committed by the Chinese government. One important pitfall to avoid, however, is to pit China against the West as two culturally different realms. In Western countries, China is often seen as a mystic Other, a question-mark, and/or as a threat. On the other hand, in China there is a strong tendency of reification of ‘the West’ (which includes everything which is not China) in strict opposition to China. I believe these oppositional thought structures are not helpful. In the same way as I believe we should differentiate between China and the PRC, we should also acknowledge that ‘the PRC’ should neither be exempt from criticism, nor being perceived as an evil threat that should be resisted at all costs. There exists a thin line between Sinophilia and Sinophobia.

The study of ‘Buddhism’ had for a long time been more immune to such dilemmas, though my sources in China indicate that even here self-censorship by critical Chinese academics is on the rise, with PRC-aligned minds filling the void that is left behind, or even just leaving scholarship of Chinese religion – critical or otherwise – altogether.5 This strategy to subtly direct intellectuals to self-censorship has been metaphorically described as the PRC being an “anaconda coiled in an overhead chandelier” (Osnos 2014). The ‘anaconda’ does not move if it does not have to, and the tacit message is that you are free to make your own assessments. But if it must, the anaconda will strike ferociously. The deterrent force of this strategy goes well beyond the individual’s self-censoring towards speaking out on the (in)famous ‘three T’s’: Tibet, Tiananmen, and Taiwan. The unofficial list of ‘sensitive topics’ is something any intellectual or artist knows without a need to name them explicitly. The psychological violence of the anaconda is incredibly effective.

But more than psychological violence to control religious infrastructures, the Chinese authorities also exercise a form of material violence, albeit structural violence (Galtung 1969). With structural violence here I mean social forces of the Chinese authorities, and how they – by means of material interventions – harm religious groups and produce and perpetuate inequality and injustice. Not only do they control which religious buildings are allowed, as part of local urban planning policies, but the Chinese authorities also initiate religious architectural projects on their own, including mosques, Buddhist

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5 It would be unwise to reveal my sources, since active persecution of scholars with dissenting perspectives is on the rise. Self-censorship has always been a way of scholarship in Chinese academia. The unwritten ‘list’ of topics to be avoided is steadily growing, however. No-one in China would be as insane to critically study the governments Xinjiang policy. But now, scholars even decide to self-censor on relatively innocent research on Buddhism.
academies and Tibetan temples. At the more vicious end of the spectrum, the Chinese authorities have also developed an incredibly extensive network of ‘re-education camps’ in the Xinjiang province to incarcerate and brainwash large proportions of the Uyghur population. Any critique of violence cannot avoid the normative dimension the concept of violence inevitably entails. Simply put, there is a near universal agreement that violence is something ‘bad’, which should be avoided. Before we establish any theory of violence to apply to violence in religion in China, we should realize this simple fact, since it directs our perception. When we identify any actor as ‘violent’ (whether Buddhist monks, the CCP, or Uyghur separatists), this immediately implies a value judgment. It might be best to suspend these value judgments as long as possible in order to describe the factual (material) situation more accurately.

3 A Critique of Violence

When we discuss religion only from the perspective of world religions and ideology, we often miss the real-world material politics at play. In the case of China, these material politics concerning religion are both an expression of CCP ideology as well as a form of structural violence (Galtung 1969). This structural violence is exercised by the Chinese state in the form of material politics and is targeted both at Buddhism and Islam. Though the aim is similar – fitting these ‘religions’ in the fold of interests of the Chinese state – its methods are different.

Over the recent years and since the rise of Xi Jinping, a new political ideology has taken shape in the PRC, which attempts to be a fusion of Maoism-Leninism, the economic and cultural vision of Deng Xiaoping, and the future looking new Maoist authoritarianism of Xi Jinping himself, with the increased adoption of native Chinese cultural elements, such as Confucianism. This new ideology, which the Chinese call ‘Xi Jinping Thought’, and which I will refer to as Xiism, is now being taught at the major universities in the PRC, such as Beijing University, Qinghua University, and the People’s University in philosophy departments. Xiism is the leading ideology of the CCP, which is seen as vanguard of the great proletarian revolution. It is fast becoming the leading “civil religion” (Bellah 1967) in the PRC today. The CCP has about 90 million members. The CCP is nominally atheistic, and members of the CCP cannot

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6 Deng Xiaoping called this euphemistically ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics.’ With Xi Jinping, the indebtedness to Confucian ethics becomes even more explicit.
have formal affiliations to any of the ‘religions’. In the view of the PRC, China is comprised of 56 ethnic groups (民族 mín zú), of which the Han Chinese are the largest group. As mentioned above, the ‘Chinese people’ are comprised of all these minorities, and include for example the Uyghurs, the Tibetans and the Inner Mongolians. ‘Religions’ are seen as belonging to people and certain religions might predominate in certain minorities (such as Buddhism amongst Tibetans and Inner Mongolians, and Islam under Uyghurs and Hui). Note that this does not exclude ethnic minorities to be members of the CCP, quite the contrary, though this must imply that they do not identify openly with any religion.

In order to better understand how structural state violence functions, and how state ideology can express itself in material politics, we can review the analysis of violence by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin has attempted to give an interpretation of violence in his famous essay Kritik der Gewalt (Critique of Violence) from 1921. In this complex though highly influential essay he has tried to merge the proletarian violence of Marxism and the idea of Messianic justice in Judaism which understands justice as something which is always at an infinite horizon (Benjamin [1921] 1965; Oostveen 2008). The starting point of his essay questions the relation between violence, law, and justice. The justification of violence is based on whether this violence is a means to a just end or an unjust end – very similar to the Dalai Lama’s evaluation of the ethical legitimacy of self-immolation of Tibetan Buddhist monks, which I will discuss later. Within this he distinguishes between ‘Natural Law’ and ‘Positive Law’; in Natural Law, the justification of violence is based solely on the justification of its ends; in Positive Law, the justification of violence is based on the perpetuation of the law. He writes: “violence, when not in the hands of the law, threatens it not by the ends that it may pursue but by its mere existence outside the law” (Benjamin [1921] 2004, 239). Benjamin goes on to further differentiate between mythical violence, which is the law-preserving violence which is used instrumentally within a legal framework and the so-called divine violence which is predicated on pure justice, is revolutionary and law-destroying. Note that both forms legitimate violence as means to a just end, with the difference that the first functions to maintain the legal framework, while the second aims at overthrowing this order, and is therefore inherently perceived as a threat by actors within the system.

Benjamin’s analysis can be applied to the current religious policy and ideological aims of the PRC. On a fundamental level, the only goal of the PRC has become to keep the CCP in power in China. To that goal, it must rely to the law-preserving force of mythical violence. The ideology of Xiism is the overarching myth to the PRC today and to which all social, cultural, economic, and religious factors are subsumed (Xi 2018; Bishop 2019). Xi Jinping redesigned
the CCP ideology, the ‘myth’ of China, to the idea of the ‘Chinese Dream’ as an alternative to the American Dream. The ‘Chinese Dream’ implies a “moderately prosperous society in all aspects” (Peters 2019; Garrick and Bennett 2018): the alleviation of poverty and a stable middle-income existence for all Chinese people; and “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Peters 2019): the communist party is the guiding entity of a socialist state, which is defined by Chinese (traditional) culture, including Chinese religions (Buddhism, Daoism, but also Islam – all the five official religions). Especially in the case of Buddhism, and then in particular what came to be called ‘Chinese Buddhism’ (汉传佛教 hàn chuán fó jiào), there is a parallel movement of societal interest and growth on the one hand, and subsummation under this Xism on the other hand. Buddhism can most easily be understood as one of those ‘Chinese characteristics’ Deng used to talk about. Furthermore, Buddhist monasteries have been extremely flexible and creative in offering an alternative lifestyle to the new urban middle and upper middle classes. The biggest monasteries outside of Beijing, for example, offer Chinese city-dwellers a weekend off in a green environment in the mountains, with relatively clean air, vegetarian (vegan) monastic food, and an opportunity to pay off spiritual depths.7

4 The Buddhist Revival

Religion in China has made a significant comeback in China after the cultural revolution (Johnson 2017). ‘Buddhism’ has benefited mostly from the post-1976 policy of controlled religious tolerance by the PRC government (Laliberté 2019). It is sufficiently foreign – as a non-native religion – but also sufficiently organized to enable a boom in followers, and sufficiently Chinese not to raise too much concern for undermining state stability either. ‘Buddhism’ in China is organized under the PRC controlled Buddhist Association of China (BAC). The BAC is a government institution which is aimed at ‘governing’ Buddhism within the legal framework of the PRC. Any Buddhist temple, group or organization must register with the BAC in order not to be marked as an illegal religious sect.8 The BAC in turn falls under the State Administration of Reli-

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7 There exists also a thin line between spiritual development and repressive tolerance.
8 Fenggang Yang (2006) has famously distinguished ‘red’, ‘black’, and ‘gray’ markets of religion in China. ‘Religious sects’ in the understanding of the PRC’s official ideology, are part of the ‘black’ or illegal ‘marketplace’ of religions and should be and are actively persecuted. Most famously, the crackdown on the Falun Gong sect has been particularly ferocious (cf. Palmer 2010).
gious Affairs (SARA), which in turn falls under the State Council of the People’s Republic in China. Though empirical studies on religious affiliation in China are notoriously unreliable, rough estimates put the number of self-identified Buddhists at about 100 million, up to 200 million when we include people with a loose affiliation, interest, or some form of practice in these numbers (Wenzel-Teuber 2012).

The most striking expression of material violence in Buddhism in the PRC we have seen in the dozens of cases of self-immolations by Tibetan monks (Jerryson 2018) against the repression of Tibetans or as a form of activism for political independence. Several scholars have pointed out that Buddhism, despite its pacifist image, has produced many instances of violence, both in terms of social repression of minority groups in countries where the religion is dominant, as well as full wars (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010). These acts of impotence are similarly an expression of ‘divine violence’ in Benjamin’s terms and are therefore a particular nuisance for the Chinese government. The Dalai Lama has said that the question of the moral permissibility of these suicides depends on the motivation or intention of the actor.

While Tibetan Buddhism has undergone a period of revival over the past decades, the Chinese government has introduced aggressive policies targeted at monastic life and Tibetan culture aimed to curb the political impact of this religious revival (Shmushko 2022). Though the control on Tibetan Buddhism is most obvious (cf. Oostveen 2020a; Powers 2016), the PRC has mostly stepped up in establishing a full control on Han Buddhism as well. For the past decades, the BAC has engaged in centralizing Buddhist Academies in the Han Buddhism tradition throughout the country, as a policy under direct control of the PRC government. Ji Zhi lists over 50 of such academies established between the early 80s and today (Zhi 2019). By establishing the Buddhist Academies at key symbolic locations, the PRC authorities make a strong claim towards encapsulating rhizomatic Buddhisms into the fold of the interests of the PRC. The control of the government on religion, justified by the societal mythology of Xiism, is therefore explicitly established by the setup of vast investments in religious infrastructures: temples, academies, but also by establishing high-speed rail networks to the most contested territories of the PRC: Tibet and Xinjiang, while being aware that some of these rail lines will never be able to operate at a profit. These religious policies of material investments capitalize on the rhizomatic networks of religion that have re-emerged after the end of the cultural revolution. By investing in both the care and the development of religious infrastructure, the government plays the role of an unavoidable Maecenas of Chinese religion.
Islam under Pressure

The encapsulation of Buddhism within the PRC by means of exercising a ‘mythical violence’ must be understood in the context of an inherent understanding of Buddhism as a ‘Chinese religion’. Though, as we will see, the tactics of material encapsulation by means of mythical violence is the same with Islam in China (Gladney 2009), a fundamental difference here is that Islam has historically been conceptualized as a ‘foreign’ religion.

‘Islam’ has been present in China as early as the seventh century, when it established a significant presence under influence of the silk roads in Xi’an, which exists until this day. Under the relatively short but influential Mongolian rule of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), the relatively tolerant religious policy of China extended even more explicitly beyond the boundaries of Chinese religions (Three Teachings) to Christianity and Islam (Murata 2013). The Uyghurs are a Turkish-Muslim minority in the far West of China, in the vast and scarcely populated Xinjiang region, which incorporates the ancient silk roads as well as the Taklamakan desert.

‘Islam’ has become a contested topic in China in the past decade, especially because of several Uyghur terrorist attacks, aimed at independence of Xinjiang as East-Turkestan. In 2013, five people were killed, and 38 people injured on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The attack was claimed by Uyghur militants. An Islamic group inflicted over a hundred casualties in a knife attack on a police station in Xinjiang in July 2014. In December 2016 again an Islamic group drove a car with a bomb in the government headquarters in Karakax county and killed two people by knife stabbing. The three militants were killed. In February 2017, five were stabbed to death in a residential compound in Pishan – the three militants were killed as well (Shan 2018). In line with Benjamin, we could call these revolutionary attacks forms of ‘divine violence’, which aim to overthrow the current political order and establish a new one.

Spooked that these attacks are invigorated by and embedded in international Islamist terrorism, the PRC decided to launch the ‘Strike Hard Campaign’

Historically, territories which constitute ‘China’ have shifted quite a bit. Generally, we could distinguish between the heartland of Han China – which roughly coincides with the diamond shape between present-day Beijing to the North, Shanghai to the East, Guangzhou to the South and Chengdu to the West – and those areas outside of that triangle: Taiwan, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Qinghai, Xinjiang etc. which have from time to time been under control of a Chinese dynasty. Again, this differentiation of no means serves to delegitimize the claim of the PRC – the current ‘dynasty’ – on those territories per se, but to show how Han Chinese culture and ‘other’ Chinese cultures can and should be distinguished.
against Violent Terrorism’ in 2014 (Human Rights Watch 2021). Also, the discourse on ‘violent extremism’ of Islam also proves very useful to legitimate a large-scale infrastructure of oppression of the Uyghur population. The most striking feature of this campaign has been the establishment of dozens of ‘re-education camps’ throughout the province, in which a large group of the adult population is assumed to be held indefinitely. The Netherlands, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium and other countries have called the PRC’s practices in Xinjiang “genocide” under the definition of international law, while other countries such as Australia and New Zealand, which rely more heavily on trade with China have so far been reluctant to follow suit (Wright 2021).

The reports on these camps, as well as the scale of the repression, are extremely hard to gauge independently. For the most, we must rely on witness reports of Uyghurs who have fled both the camps and China to places like Kazakhstan and the West (such as the report by Khatchadourian 2021). In addition to these witness reports, we can rely on the satellite images that show us the emergence of a vast network of ‘reeducation’ facilities or concentration camps throughout Xinjiang. After an initial period in which the Chinese authorities denied the existence of these camps, they have now changed course by acknowledging these facilities exist and explain them as “vocational training centers” (Raza 2019). The Chinese myth of Xiism and the Chinese Dream expresses itself in the mythical violence that appears through the establishment of repressive infrastructures.

6 Conclusion

Both ‘Buddhism’ and ‘Islam’ have come under pressure by the Chinese government in recent years. The ethno-cultural repression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, however, shows that this pressure is not the same for every religious organization. Chinese Buddhists and Hui Muslims face different challenges than Tibetan Buddhists and Uyghur Muslims. The categorization of ‘religions’ (宗教 zōng jiào) on the one hand and the categorization of ‘minorities’ (民族 mín zú) on the other hand have enabled the Chinese government to repress when needed and incorporate when expedient.

The PRC represents an order of law under the ideology of Xiism, which can use the full force of the state apparatus and the People’s Liberation Army. It employs what Benjamin has called a mythical violence, based on the monopoly of violence that sovereign states have in the international global order. This mythical violence is law-preserving and violence is used as a means to
this. The ‘world religions paradigm’ serves the PRC to ‘divide and conquer’ rhizomatic religion – Buddhist, or Islamic, or otherwise – present in China. The PRC explicitly recognizes ‘religions’ including their societal value, incorporates them institutionally under SARA, and is then able to exercise continuous control over them to fit within the framework of the Chinese Dream. This is done not only by cultural control, but also by developing and investing in a communist-sanctioned religious infrastructure of Buddhist schools, temples, ‘vocational training camps’, high-speed rail links to regions of religious interest, but also by targeted demolition of religious sites that are unwelcome. Various Islamic and Buddhist groups or individuals violently challenge this Pax Sinica. They have employed attempts at divine violence, to overthrow the order of law, by violent attacks in the case of Islamic Uyghurs and by self-immolations by Tibetan Buddhist monks. The campaigns of the PRC authorities to crush these uprisings have been ferocious. The extended infrastructural network of ‘vocational training camps’ which has been set up, has the explicit purpose to repress Uyghur culture. Various states have condemned these practices even as genocidal.

In the case of Hui Islam and Chinese Buddhism, the response has not been this brutal. But the PRC does repress the religious expression in Hui-majority territories more and more, and the control of the state on Chinese Buddhism is arguably part of a continuous campaign of incorporation. Here, the mythical violence of the PRC is felt as a form of structural state violence.

References


