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Transcending counterterrorism discourse: metaphors, identity politics and ideological security in Xinjiang

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ABSTRACT

Following the 9/11 attacks in New York, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has referred to Xinjiang as the key battlefield of counterterrorism in China, and its countering measures as contributions to the international fight against terrorism and religious extremism. This paper transcends the labels of counterterrorism and prevention of extremism to delve deeper into the CPC official counterterrorism discourse in Xinjiang. Through Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) it explores the underlying ideology of the CPC, essential to understand how perceived threats are interpreted and responded to, leading to political actions that reflect existing power structures within China's political system. The analysis examines regional measures within the broader concept of "comprehensive national security" (Zǒngtǐ guójiā ānquán guān 总体国家安全观), deriving into policies that aim to integrate minority identities into a unified "Chinese identity" informed by Xi Jinping's "Five Identifications" (wǔ gè rèntóng 五个认同) to protect and promote ideological security. This study contributes to discussions on China's counterterrorism strategy, exploring it as part of a broader national security approach, where identity politics is central to the CPC's legitimacy and, thus, regime stability.

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Counterterrorism; extremism prevention; identity politics; metaphor analysis; Xinjiang

Introduction

Following the September 11 attacks in New York, China adopted a new rhetoric that reframed previous conflicts in Xinjiang as part of its counterterrorism efforts, rather than counterrevolutionary struggles (Rodríguez-Merino 2023; Vuori 2023). Since then, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has referred to Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) as the key battlefield of counterterrorism in China, and its countering measures as direct contributions to the international fight against terrorism and religious extremism.

Xinjiang White Papers have been regularly published since 26 May 2003 – see Table 1, signalling the effect of the launch of the global war on terror and, more

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Table 1. Overview of the XJWP corpus.

XJWP publication	Publisher	Date published	Number of words
<i>Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang</i>	The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (SCIO)	August 2019	6,905
<i>Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang</i>	The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (SCIO)	July 2019	6,867
<i>The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang</i>	The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (SCIO)	March 2019	9,519
<i>Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang</i>	The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (SCIO)	November 2018	6,096
<i>Human Rights in Xinjiang – Development and Progress</i>	The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (SCIO)	June (2017)	7,888
<i>Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang</i>	The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (SCIO)	June 2016	5,401
<i>Historical Witness to Ethnic Equality, Unity and Development in Xinjiang</i>	The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (SCIO)	September 2015	15,964
<i>The History and Development of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps</i>	The Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China ² (SCIO)	October (2014)	5,172
<i>Development and Progress in Xinjiang</i>	Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (SCIO)	September (2009)	13,485
<i>History and Development of Xinjiang</i>	Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (SCIO)	May 2003	15,504

Source: Author's elaboration.

particularly, the inclusion of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist group within the United States and UN lists of terrorist groups¹ in 2002. East Turkistan is the name given to the group's ambitioned independent state for current Xinjiang, deepening the roots of the Party's concern in separatist ambitions among Uyghur ethnic group in the region (Castets 2003). According to the official discourse, ETIM holds links with ISIS and has been spreading to East, South and Central Asia and the Middle East, having between 1,000 and 3,000 fighters in Syria and, therefore, representing an international threat (People's Daily 2022).

Despite the recent emphasis on terrorism and extremism in China's official discourse on Xinjiang, these terms have been often jointly applied as a three-in-one term – terrorism, ethnic separatism and religious extremism (the Three Evil Forces 三股势力). Ethnic separatism remains the main concern for the CPC after the wave of separatist movements in the 1990s in Central Asia, which led to the creation of independent states (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and fueled separatist ambitions in bordering XUAR (Clarke 2018; Klimeš 2018).

Post 9.11 discourse has emphasised the links between ethnic separatism and international terrorism and religious extremism, keeping separatism as the central concern for the CPC and therefore the main driver of its counterterrorism measures in Xinjiang (García-Noblejas Floriano 2022). Since 2018, the discovery of the so-called Vocational Education and Training Centers (VETCs) in Xinjiang – officially justified as measures against terrorism and religious extremism in the region – raised international criticism. This paper argues that to correctly understand the issue, it is fundamental to transcend the emphatic use of terrorism and extremism in front of an international audience and bring the focus to the Party's central concern – territorial integrity and social stability –.

Although scholars have analysed metaphors as persuasive tools in political discourse (Charteris-Black 2004; Musolff 2010; Otieno, Attyang, and Owino 2016), and particularly

within counterterrorism rhetoric (Kruglanski et al. 2007; Spencer 2012), their significant role in the context of Xinjiang has been overlooked. Using metaphors as a key analytical tool, this paper connects political ideology and political action, empirically showing that measures to counter terrorism and prevent religious extremism in Xinjiang form part of a broader national security strategy grounded on CPC's historical and current ideological trends. It argues that measures implemented in Xinjiang are attributable to a combination of inherited regional factors – the Party's interpretation of Xinjiang's distinctive ethnic and religious identities as potential sources of political instability – and, more recently, broader cultural security concerns under Xi Jinping's leadership. Recognising the Party's concerns, this paper examines the ideological basis for counterterrorism measures to address them, verifying how identity management and social engineering emerge as part of the political strategy to maintain social stability. This paper transcends discussions on the instrumentalization of labels, such as “terrorism” and “extremism” to redirect attention to the underlying core belief system and priorities that sustain these measures.

To support the main thesis of this study, this paper focuses on two key arguments. First, the Party's official counterterrorism discourse reveals Party legitimacy in Xinjiang as a core priority and as a preventive measure against terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. An analysis of metaphors reveals that identity building is central to CPC measures in Xinjiang under Xi Jinping, reflecting two key sources of Party legitimacy: people's identification with Chinese culture/civilisation and compliance with the CPC's economic model. This paper argues that the first aspect – the centrality of Chinese culture/civilisation – is linked to ontological perceptions of cultural hierarchy within China, where ethnic and religious identities are integrated within a broader national or “Chinese” identity as a source of cultural and ideological security (*yìshí xíngtài ānquán* 意识形态安全) – which is itself engrained within a wider concept of “comprehensive national security” (*Zǒngtǐ guójiā ānquán guān* 总体国家安全观).³ It also asserts that the second aspect – compliance with the CPC's economic model – relates to the interpretation (and promotion) of a particular development model and identification with the core values of Chinese socialism as the right “path.”

This paper interprets metaphors in China's official counterterrorism discourse through the lens of Party's ideology and, particularly, Xi Jinping's “Five Identifications” (*wǔ gè rèntóng* 五个认同) (Cui 2016) – ethnic identification with (1) the motherland, (2) the Chinese nation/race, (3) Chinese culture, (4) the CPC and (5) socialism with Chinese characteristics. It contends that these ultimately merge into the concept of legitimacy. As the analysis will show, eudemonic or performance legitimacy (Dickson 2016; Holbig and Gilley 2010) – through economic development, modernisation and prosperity in the case of China –, and affective legitimacy (Zhai 2023) – through the promotion of cultural and emotional ties between society and the ruling power – manifest through metaphor analysis.

Metaphor analysis will also show the dichotomic representations of participants in the discourse, emphasising their rational and moral evaluations and thus their implicit classification as either “friends” or “enemies” according to their compliance with the CPC's constructed national identity. This is used to justify counterterrorism and preventive measures against religious extremism in Xinjiang as actions needed to reconnect those who do not identify with the Party's worldview on development and the nation. In this context, the use of internationally recognised labels such as “terrorism” and, especially,

“religious extremism” bridges CPC priorities and United Nations (UN) recommendations on deradicalisation, legitimising measures aimed at promoting ethnic identification with CPC ideology and goals as counter-extremism measures adapted to local conditions⁴ to fight and prevent separatist movements in Xinjiang.

Thus, this paper demonstrates the significance of metaphors as key ideological tools and their role in political discourse, providing valuable insights into power dynamics and social structures. Setting from a prior exhaustive corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the Xinjiang White Papers (XJWP) published between 2002 and 2019 (García-Noblejas Floriano 2022), this study uses metaphors to provide an empirically based and more nuanced understanding of the ideological foundations of counterterrorism measures in Xinjiang. In doing so, this approach advances existing literature and refines understanding by highlighting the central role of the Five Identifications, connecting this way counterterrorism research on Xinjiang with broader national political-ideological frameworks through the application of CMA.

Counterterrorism, identity and ideological security in Xinjiang

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and its establishment as an Autonomous Region in 1955, Xinjiang has experienced waves of ethnoreligious clashes and resistance to the CPC rule, particularly after the 1980s (Bovingdon 2010; Smith Finley 2021; Vuori 2023) and further exacerbated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Central Asian states. A set of international and national events – the War in Syria; the expansion of the Islamic State; a wave of attacks beyond Xinjiang borders; and the increasing geopolitical role of XUAR as a gateway to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)⁵ –, led to intensified surveillance of Uyghur social life and religious practices, officially framing these measures as counterterrorism and prevention of extremism (Smith Finley 2020).

The appointment of Chen Quanguo as Party Secretary in Xinjiang in 2016 led to the increase of security spending, big data surveillance and securitisation (Zenz and Leibold 2017), efforts referred to by Vuori (2023) as the “macrosecuritization” of XUAR. According to international reports, this campaign resulted in the internment of 3.8 million Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups in 1,200 camps in Xinjiang, officially referred to as VETCs (Kam and Clarke 2021; Greitens, Lee, and Yazici 2020; Smith Finley 2019; Vuori 2023; Zenz 2023). Zenz (2023) characterises these as an unprecedented re-education campaign in Xinjiang, which, linked to the promulgation of the Regulations on De-Extremification in March 2017, represents an innovative form of Maoist labour reform aimed at social integration and overcoming non-Han resistance through ethnocultural assimilation into Han Chinese culture. The government’s official discourse frames these centres as direct contributions to international prevention of extremism through integration and poverty alleviation efforts.

The figure of Chen Quanguo has also been linked to the so-called People’s War on Terror (Ingram 2018). Evoking Mao’s People’s War (Kam and Clarke 2021), the People’s War on Terror (fankong renmin zhanzheng 反恐人民战争) was presented as a core component of China’s holistic counterterrorism strategy in the region (Xie and Liu 2019), calling for public participation in combating terrorism. In this regard, the Party’s response to terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang reflects a “mass line ethos,” where Party legitimacy is

reinforced through a discourse that frames actors in dichotomic terms – as friends or enemies – thereby mobilising collective efforts to ensure regional stability (Zhang 2022). This strategy underscores the role of ideological tenets in combating extremism and reflects on the state's efforts in Xinjiang as a social engineering project to guarantee Party legitimacy and regime stability (Kam and Clarke 2021).

Prior research identified economic development and modernisation as central to legitimacy in Xinjiang (Barabantseva 2009; Smith Finley 2021; Vuori 2023). Barabantseva (2009) analysed ethnic framing under the national Western Development Project (WDP), which, since 1999, redirected the state's emphasis on economic development and modernisation – a core strategy since the late 1970s – towards bordering regions. According to Barabantseva's research, economic development was paired with cultural modernisation, which was allegedly needed to shape ethnic mentalities into what was implicitly considered a comparatively superior Han ideology, advanced *vis-à-vis* ethnic minorities and thus rational leaders of China's modernisation. Therefore, a state-centred modernisation agenda defined “consumerism, competitiveness, science, secularity and openness” as pre-established values, in contrast to ethnic culture, which was framed as the source of economic problems in western regions and referred to as “agricultural, religious, autarchic and feudal” (Barabantseva 2009, 247).

More recently, Greitens, Lee, and Yazici (2020) examined the push for a “second-generation minority policy” (25) in 2011, emphasising patriotism over ethnic identity. Initially disregarded, this approach eventually crystallised under Xi Jinping, reinforcing ideological assimilation of ethnic minorities into mainstream society (Roche and Leibold 2020) and applying heightened assertiveness in implement political action. At their core, both approaches reflect the CPC's perception of distinctive ethnic identity as a potential threat to territorial integrity and political stability; as such, both imply an underlying social hierarchy in which minorities must identify with unifying social values and norms – constructed by the CPC – which ultimately reveal the CPC's understanding of identity as a malleable concept.

These political strategies and trends gradually accumulated, becoming increasingly explicit and culminated in the formal promotion of the Five Identifications. Notably, the concept of the Five Identifications, which is closely linked to ethnic and religious policies in China, is surprisingly lacking in most research about Xinjiang or China's counterterrorism in the region. Xi Jinping first introduced the “Four Identifications” during a speech given at the National Ideological and Political Work Conference in 2014, marking a milestone in ideological and political education, particularly for ethnic minorities and religious groups in bordering regions. A fifth Identification – identification with the Chinese path to modernisation or socialism with Chinese characteristics – was officially added following the 19th National Congress of the CPC in October 2017. The Five Identifications underpin China's ethnic and religious policies and – as CMA shows – represents a central element in the Party's discourse on Xinjiang and its linked counterterrorism discourse. By promoting a specific identity that integrates society with the Party, it encourages a population that trustfully supports the regime, therefore preventing violent subversion (Famularo 2018, 40). This effort exemplifies what Klimeš (2018) refers to as ideational governance, defined as “the plethora of party-state efforts to define and regulate Uyghur values, beliefs and loyalties so that they are instrumental in maintaining the regime's political security” (Klimeš 2018, 415). Cultural and ideational domains –

religion and language, particularly – are often used as symbols of political resistance in Xinjiang, becoming the target of propaganda to direct public opinion, counter ethnic conflict and guarantee Uyghur's loyalty to the Party's authority.

Even though extensive research has taken a critical stance on the political actions in Xinjiang (Roberts 2018a, 2018b; Smith Finley 2019, 2020), as well as analysing CPC measures and official anti-terrorism rhetoric in the region (Clarke 2018; Rodríguez-Merino 2023), this paper argues that existing scholarship often suffers from fragmentation, and CPC ideology is not given sufficient prominence. As mentioned, the official discourse justifies measures in Xinjiang, such as the VETCs, as direct contributions to the global fight against terrorism and religious extremism. However, the discourse also reflects elements of ideational governance aimed at constructing a unified national identity, which seeks to address historical ethnic tensions and separatism. Through CMA, this paper aims to contribute to existing literature by deconstructing this dual discourse, revealing how these measures, while emphatically framed as counterterrorism and prevention of religious extremism, mainly serve to strengthen the Party's legitimacy, prevent inter-ethnic conflict and ultimately sustain regime stability.

Intersecting discourse, ideology and persuasion in Xinjiang's security policies

Noting the use of language and labels by the CPC as a tool to attach international legitimacy to its counterterrorism measures in Xinjiang, several scholars have applied discourse analysis to explore China's official counterterrorism discourse. Zhang (2021) and Lan and Navera (2022) applied CDA to show the use of dichotomous representations of "good" (or "normal") and "illegal" (or "extremist") religious practices as a deliberate rhetorical tool to legitimate a discourse that both seek to justify CPC measures in Xinjiang and foster unity between the Party and the people.

Rodríguez-Merino (2023) provided a holistic insight into China's official discourse on unrest in Xinjiang, explaining its evolution from the 1980s to the present day. Using discourse as a central element of his analysis, he demonstrated the shift in the framing of the perceived threat as part of an international struggle related to global terrorism and extremism – Rodríguez-Merino refers to this as a process of "terroristization." Based on an analysis of official reports on five key events in Xinjiang,⁶ Rodríguez-Merino argues that the Chinese authorities have "emphasized a link between Islam and violence to legitimize a crackdown on religious extremism as the core front in the counterterrorism efforts" (Rodríguez-Merino 2023, 117), which ultimately articulates "a preemptive war against terrorism and religious extremism as the rational response to conflict with the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities in the region" (Rodríguez-Merino 2023, 123).

By applying metaphor analysis, Liu and Li (2023) explored the framing role of metaphors in an official video of Xinjiang titled "Xinjiang is a wonderful land". This research established a wide approach to metaphorical translation – both verbal and visual – related to Xinjiang, providing insight into the use of metaphor within this issue. Applying Fairclough's (2015) CDA and Charteris-Black (2004) model for CMA, Liu and Li explored the types of images emphasised in this context, including, for example, references to Xinjiang in a journey to success. Despite important questions left unchallenged – such as China's use of the UN as a platform to legitimise CPC measures in Xinjiang – Liu and Li

noted the framing of Xinjiang as a human in China's fight against terrorism and extremism, thereby representing counterterrorism as a war.

Despite referencing Xinjiang as the key "battlefield" of counterterrorism and religious extremism in China and the central role of metaphors in this context, attention to these is still scarce in academic research. This paper shows how metaphors expose political ideology and priorities – which ultimately underpin security measures implemented in Xinjiang – and provide a legitimating role by implicitly evaluating the participants and their actions in dichotomous terms. Despite the internationalisation of the Party's counterterrorism discourse as a tool for legitimisation, this analysis deconstructs it to provide empirical evidence of the ideological roots driving the interpretation and response to the instability in Xinjiang, which is seen as a result of lacking legitimacy, stemming from the insufficient ethnic identification with the Chinese nation. More specifically, measures implemented in Xinjiang are a form of nation-building, aimed at aligning ethnic and religious groups with the Party's centralised ideology as a preventive strategy against separatism. Through the often-underestimated CMA, this paper ultimately endeavours to integrate and update prior academic perspectives, contributing to a deeper understanding of the Party's interpretation and response to the situation in Xinjiang.

Critical metaphor analysis. Conceptual framework and methodology

Conceptual frameworks: critical discourse analysis and metaphors analysis

Any study that aims at establishing links between discourse and ideology first needs to define ideology. Following van Dijk, we assume ideology as a form of social cognition, which represents systems of shared beliefs. One of the main claims of Discourse Studies is that " ... ideologies are largely acquired, expressed, and reproduced by discourse, and that hence a discourse analytical approach is crucial to understand the way ideologies emerge, spread, and are used by social groups" (van Dijk 2013, 176). As such, an *ideology schema* (using van Dijk's term) involves a set of categories (identity, activities, goals, norms and values, group relations, resources ...) that are considered in this research. In this way, discourse analysis provides insights into how language shapes – and is shaped by – ideological and power dynamics and thus explores the relationships between discourse, power and social practices (Wodak and Meyer 2009).

As an object of study within Discourse Analysis, metaphors have been analysed through different lenses. Conceptual Metaphor Theory – CMT – (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) defends that language is not independent of context and that mental structures impact language applications. Therefore, metaphors represent subjective cognitive systems dependent on experience. Besides reflecting the producer's ideology and intentions, metaphors have also been regarded as covert tools of persuasion (Charteris-Black 2004). Charteris-Black has expanded CMT to investigate the pragmatic role of metaphors, which underpins their use in influencing public opinion. Thus, the use of metaphors not only supports the promotion of underlying ideologies but also the purpose or intentions of the producer. Therefore, metaphor analysis is "an exploration of the inner subjectivity of speakers – what it is that is unique to their perception of the world – and forms the basis for their response to particular situations and to particular ideas" (Charteris-Black 2004, 11).

Semantically, metaphors involve a conceptual transfer between two cognitive domains, with the target domain receiving the attributes of an abstract source domain and thus reflecting “the understanding and experience of one element in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 6). By transferring meaning between two concepts, a metaphor builds perception in its audience and thus constitutes an important persuasive tool within political discourse. Charteris-Black (2018) has referred to these as “ideological metaphors” because they carry persuasive goals and try to legitimise the worldview and actions of the producer. Metaphors do not solely determine the application of specific political measures; rather, they “open up space for policy possibilities” (Spencer 2012, 399).

Related to Charteris-Black’s study of metaphors as tools of persuasion, authors including van Dijk (2008) and van Leeuwen (2008) have regarded political discourse as a source of legitimacy, providing theoretical and methodological approaches that have informed this paper. Van Leeuwen (2008) defined four main legitimating categories in discourse (authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation and mythopoesis), and proposed the analysis of socio-semantic structures to understand the degree of agency assigned to different participants within the social hierarchy and, most importantly, their evaluation. As it will be shown in this paper, metaphors represent remarkable carriers of moral evaluation. For his part, van Dijk (2008) has referred to the “Ideological Square”, an ideological discourse strategy whereby the positive attributes of the producer (“us”) are systematically represented positively, while the negative attributes are discarded; in contrast, the positive aspects of “the other” (“them”) are mitigated and the negative aspects emphasised. Through this representation of “us” against “them,” discourse exalts political authority and discredits opponents.

Owing to a lack of holistic studies applying CMA to examine CPC measures in Xinjiang, this paper provides new evidence of how, despite its recent rhetoric connection to China’s war on terror, the core priority of the CPC strategy in Xinjiang is linked to ethnic integration to the “motherland” and the mainstream ideology of the state as a source of legitimacy. In doing so, this paper highlights the centrality of Xi Jinping’s ideational governance – particularly the ideological framework of the Five Identifications – to the Party’s official discourse on Xinjiang and the religious and ethnic measures implemented there.

Methodology and key general findings

Given the link established by the CPC between China’s war on terror and Xinjiang, this paper analyzes a corpus consisting of the first published XJWP up to 2019,⁷ comprising a total of 10 documents (see Table 1).

NVivo computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used to process, observe and classify elements within the XJWP corpus. The analysis began with a systematic reading of the whole corpus, using NVivo software to manually codify the text through a process of open coding. Coding – developing code structures within the corpus – is a fundamental step of CDA (Babbie 2017). After the introduction of the corpus into the NVivo platform, the coding process required repeated and reflective reading of each fragment in a “word by word, line by line” coding process, minimising the analyst’s biases and “allowing new ideas to emerge” (Charmaz 2006, 48–54). A system of labels was

gradually developed, which were subsequently regrouped according to their similarities and interrelations into primary codes and subcodes (a process called “axial coding”), enabling the visualisation of patterns and communicative strategies in the discourse (participants in the discourse, frequent terms and/or concepts ...).

After the researcher became familiar with the corpus’s overall content, a second round of coding focused on metaphorical expressions as the primary object of analysis. To achieve robust results, we followed Charteris-Black’s (2004) systematic procedure, which involves the following steps:

(A) Identification: A new round of reading focuses on the location and labelling of “candidate metaphor” (CM) in the corpus. CMs were then further examined using the KeyWord in Context (KWIC) tool⁸ to determine whether they were used in a metaphorical or literal sense. Taking the metaphor identification procedure proposed by Vrije University Amsterdam (MIPVU, for its acronym in English – Metaphor Identification Procedure)⁹ as main reference, we determined which CMs really presented an incoherence (e.g. incongruity or semantic tension) within the corpus, causing disruption between the semantic meaning of a lexical unit and its application in context. In this way, CMs are scrutinised to determine whether their pragmatic meaning in context shifts its literal meaning. For instance, the basic meaning of “crops” as large-scale cultivation of plants, or “mental shackles” as a pair of fetters to fasten a prisoner’s wrists, is altered in context when used to refer to “ethnic groups” or “religious extremism” respectively. These were, therefore, classified as metaphors.

(B) Observation and Classification: Once metaphors had been identified and revised, they were classified according to their source (the conceptual domain from which the metaphor originates – which contributes features, like “crops” or “mental shackles”) and target (which receives those attributes, like “ethnic groups” or “religious extremism”) domains. Classification by source domain first required establishing an explicit and detailed list of labels referring to the source (e.g. plant, root, soil, plague, or weed), which were later reclassified according to their construction of a broader image (see [table 2](#)). Classification by target domain identified and organised metaphors according to who – or what – they referred to (e.g. development ethnic groups, culture, the CPC, religious clergy and VETCs). This binary classification created two metaphor maps that enabled the identification of the main target and source domains in metaphors within the discourse.

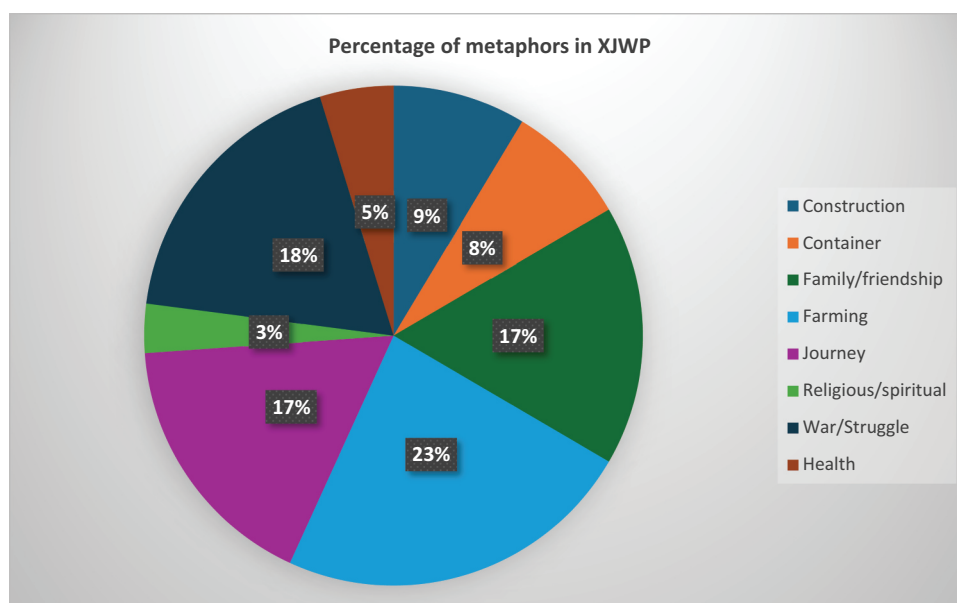
Although primarily qualitative, this analysis incorporates figures and percentages to highlight the most common metaphorical expressions in the discourse, shedding light on preferred discursive strategies due to their cognitive relevance or persuasive power. [Figure 1](#) shows how metaphorical expressions related to farming and agriculture were the most frequent ones (with 103 references, 23% of the total), followed by war/struggle metaphorical expressions (with a total of 80 references, 18% of the total), family/friendship metaphors and journey metaphors (with 74 and 75 references, respectively, 17% of the total).

Afterwards, a matrix was created in which rows listed all the source domains and columns listed all the target domains (see [Table 3](#)), reflecting the source-target domain

Table 2. Resulting source domains in XJWP.

Source domain	References	Frequency
Construction/building metaphors	Formation, consolidation, build, on the basis, base, pillar, lay foundation for, construction, foundation or field, construct ...	38
Container metaphors	Flow into; melting pot, mosaic, contribution, flow into, part of, component ...	35
Family/friendship metaphors	Family, brothers and sisters, motherland, close ties, heritage, succeeding generations, (spiritual) home, bonds, embrace, friendship, hearts, flesh-and-blood ties, join hands, nurture ...	74
Farming metaphors	Fruits; (to) mushroom; take root/(to) root; fertile soil; landscape; flourish; ingrained; cultivate; grassroot; incubate; grow; spread; breed; hotbed; nip in the bud; germinate ...	103
Journey metaphors	Path, advance; backward; have gone a long way; onto the road; leader on the road; (modernisation) drive; go ahead; keep pace; starting point; press forward; taking steps; gone to great lengths; path towards; move forward; headway; China; carry forward; marched into; accelerate; speed up, step; drive ...	75
Religious/Spiritual metaphors	Enshrine, spirit, blessing, bewitch, sacrifice ...	14
War/struggle metaphors	Battlefield, fight, bulkwark, shield, victim; sword; war; suffering, strike; enemy; scourge, saviour, rescue, struggle, strive, struck, crack down, undermine; liberation, freedom, shackles...), smashing, resisting, liberation and revolution, under the banner, struggle; strive, save, victories; to trumpet, defeat, combat ...	80
Health metaphors	Malignant tumour, healthy (lifestyle/development/atmosphere), poisoned, symptoms, rehabilitate ...	21
TOTAL		440

Source: Author's elaboration.

**Figure 1.** Overall percentage of metaphors in XJWP.

mapping or association in the discourse. Taking farming metaphors as an example, ethnic people were referred to as “crops,” development as “fruits,” Chinese culture as “fertile soil,” separatism as a “weed,” and so on, signalling a common semantic structure related to agricultural and farming source domains, which we agglutinate under the conceptual

Table 3. Source-to-target domain mapping matrix.

	China	Development	Culture	History	Ethnic groups	Education	Law	Human Rights	Religion	terrorism, extremism, separatism	Xinjiang	XPCC
Health	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	16	0	0
Construction	10	16	2	0	3	2	0	1	2	8	2	0
Container/ compilation	4	3	18	0	0	0	0	0	9	0	3	4
Family/ friendship	16	7	27	0	8	2	0	0	2	5	15	5
Farming	3	19	17	0	9	1	0	0	10	27	3	3
Freedom	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	2	11	0	0
Journey	7	33	7	0	4	2	0	1	4	12	5	2
Religious/ Spiritual	0	5	5	0	1	0	2	0	2	3	0	1
War/struggle	4	5	4	1	3	1	0	0	3	37	11	2

Source: Author's elaboration.

metaphor: “China as farm”. Most interestingly, this analysis allowed us to observe transversal images depicting a single target domain, such as, for example, the central government being depicted as a caretaker in a family, a leader on a path or a pillar or foundation in a construction.

(C) Analysis and Interpretation: Once metaphors have been observed and semantically classified, they needed to be interpreted to assess their role in their own context. This allowed us to determine the function of metaphors and consider their persuasive role within political discourse, providing insight into the ideology and goals of the CPC. At this level, we drew on van Dijk’s (2008) and van Leeuwen’s (2008) work to consider the framing of social actors (or participants) in the discourse and their implicit evaluation through metaphors as legitimating/delegitimizing instruments, thereby reflecting on the persuasive – and thus pragmatic – role of metaphors. In this research, we focused on the metaphorical expressions that best illustrated CPC’s official depiction of ethnicity, culture and religion within counterterrorism discourse as a reflection of an underlying interpretation of hierarchical sociopolitical relations. As such, we assessed conceptual metaphors representing “China as farm” – and particularly Chinese culture and civilisation as “fertile soil” – and China as “family,” including metaphorical representations of ethnic groups and religions. Following this, we considered metaphors representing development as a “journey,” in which the CPC acts as the guide, ultimately examining the use of metaphors to support the implementation of assimilationist measures in Xinjiang – such as the controversial VETCs as counterterrorism and religious extremism prevention measures. In all these examples, a full interpretation implies the consideration of other source domains to the same target domain.

This paper aims to go beyond prior analyses by exploring metaphors that, while situated within China’s counterterrorism and religious extremism prevention measures, reveal how the Party interprets instability in Xinjiang as a lack of legitimacy and how this influences its policies. Consequently, the war metaphor is not further explored in this paper because, primarily linked to the target domain of “threat” - terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism -, we felt it would mainly dwell on the legitimating role of the counterterrorism discourse, reiterating prior discussions (García-Noblejas Floriano 2022; Kruglanski et al. 2007; Yu, Yue, and Yan 2023).

Analysis and discussion

Farming ideologies: metaphors of growth, control and extremism in Xinjiang’s political discourse

In a country with nearly 500 million rural residents, the importance of rural contexts is self-evident. Despite the remarkable decrease in rural population in China – 84% in 1960 to 35% in 2023 (World Bank 2023), the CPC No. 1 Central Document¹⁰ has consistently prioritised, since its first publication in 1983, the central role of rural areas and agriculture for the Party (Rozelle and Kennedy 2024). The bonds between the peasantry and the CPC are multiple and can be traced back to the Chinese Revolution under Mao Zedong, who in

1940 wrote that “... the peasant problem becomes the basic problem of the Chinese revolution, and the strength of the peasants is the main strength of the Chinese revolution” (Mao 1940, 24). Therefore, the rural context represents an intrinsic part of the PRC, the Party’s ideology and its government. While the plant metaphor is not unique to Chinese political discourse, the farming imagery in this context, as shown below, reinforces Party ideology by implying a social hierarchy and a moral distinction between good and evil.

The analysis unveiled frequent metaphorical expressions referring to the “cultivation” of ethnic people, religious clergy, or religious circles; ethnic cultures “taking root” or “flourishing”; Chinese culture/civilisation as “fertile soil”; and development as providing “fruits.” Metaphorical expressions related to farming, such as “breed,” “grow” and “spread,” were also used to refer to religious extremism as “weed” or “plague.” Given the potential interpretation of some elements as “soil,” “crops” or “fruits,” we refer to these through the conceptual metaphor of “China is a farm.” Observing these farming metaphors in the discourse, we identified a set of metaphorical expressions that represented different elements of farming, implying moral evaluation and classifying people and thought according to their legitimacy/illegitimacy and/or hierarchy. Thus, the location of this conceptual metaphor raised several questions for its interpretation: (1) what are the target domains of the “fertile soil” where the “crops” can grow healthily?; (2) which “plants/crops” are depicted as desireds, and, in contrast, which are represented as undesired “crops/weed”?; (3) what is their substrate, weed bed, or “hotbed”?; and (4) which are the key “fruits” that depend on effective cultivation? The answers to these questions enabled us to map the elements between the source and target domains, which then revealed the practical implications of these metaphors for policy making.

Among the metaphors within the farming or natural resource domains, the representation of ethnic cultures and religions was significant. Earlier farming metaphors were found in 2003, which referred to different religions or traditional ethnic cultures as “flourishing.” In 2009, the discourse referred to the state’s commitment to “cultivate” both ethnic groups and Islamic clergy, which not only represented ethnic minorities and religious personnel as crops but also implicitly depicted the State and Xinjiang Government as farmers, whose support “has laid the foundation for Xinjiang’s development” (SCIO 2015, 23), allowing “people of the various ethnic groups” to benefit from its “fruits” (10). By 2016, economic and social developments were represented as a “foundation,” used this time to counter religious extremism.

Xinjiang facilitates its economic and social development, ... and other social aspects of all ethnic groups, prevent[ing] the breeding of extremist thoughts, and consolidate[ing] the social foundation for resisting religious extremism. (SCIO 2016, 10)

2016 represented an important milestone as it was the first time that political ideology and values were explicitly inserted into metaphorical expressions. Religious circles in Xinjiang are portrayed as “taking root in the local soil and culture”, assimilating localisation with the adoption of religion “with Chinese characteristics” as well as other values, such as “... patriotism, peace, unity, moderation, tolerance and benevolence ...” (SCIO 2016, 10). While patriotism points to devotion to China as a “traditional” value “inherited” by religious groups in Xinjiang, other values, such as moderation and benevolence reflect

Confucian core values as traditional Chinese values, which are implicitly assumed in the discourse as widely accepted by religious circles in Xinjiang.

The use of “fertile soil” as a source domain became increasingly abstract by referring to “Chinese civilization” in broad terms. This metaphor represents Chinese civilisation as the foundation and catalyst for ethnic cultures, inferring a hierarchy by implying the dependency of ethnic cultures and religions on it. Therefore, farming metaphors such as “fertile soil” implied a conditionality based on assimilation of “Chinese characteristics.”

Since ancient times many ethnic groups have made their way to Xinjiang, and it has become their home and a place for cultural integration. Various ethnic cultures of Xinjiang have their roots in the fertile soil of Chinese civilization, advancing their own cultural development while enriching the overall culture of China. (SCIO 2018, 1)

Other metaphorical expressions used in 2003 and 2009 that referred to ethnic cultures as providing valuable contributions to greater Chinese culture and Chinese civilisation as a container (into which ethnic cultures flow) reinforce this sense of hierarchy. While these metaphorical representations were present in the first XJWP published in 2003 – maintaining the subordination of ethnic cultures and religions to an integrating Chinese culture, – they become more emphasised by 2018.

In Xinjiang, Buddhist culture reached a very high level . . . greatly enriching the cultural and art treasury of China and the whole world. (SCIO 2003, 4)

This did not alter the fact that ethnic cultures in Xinjiang were ingrained with Chinese features. (SCIO 2019b, 15)

It is undeniable that Xinjiang was influenced by Islamic culture, but this did not halt the flow of local cultures into the Chinese civilization, nor did it alter the fact that they were part of Chinese culture. (SCIO 2019a, 4)

It was also possible to detect the representation of ideological elements in dichotomous terms, with such representations serving as a source of legitimacy/illegitimacy. The “fertile soil” related to Chinese civilisation and the “foundation” laid by the government for fruitful crops are contrasted with representations of religious extremism as an “ideological foundation” for violent terrorism, which were first represented in 2016 as both a “weed” and “plague” that “has grown and spread” in Xinjiang.

Affected by international religious extremism, religious extremism has grown and spread in Xinjiang in recent years. (SCIO 2016, 9)

It [religious extremism] is by nature anti-human, anti-society, anti-civilization and anti-religion, and is an important ideological foundation for violent and terrorist activities. (SCIO 2016, 9)

Thus, the farming metaphor reflects power structures in different ways. The representation of ethnic and religious groups as crops implies that their potential for growth depends on the essential care of a farmer. This metaphor reinforces the Party’s role to provide a nourishing environment for healthy development, entailing a paternalistic relationship towards ethnic and religious groups and suggesting a certain degree of control over the growth and development of people (contrasting to natural and organic growth). There is an implied hierarchical relationship between the State and the people, where healthy and fruitful growth (of people in

Xinjiang) depends not only on the care of the Party but also on their integration into Chinese civilisation and culture as a core and harmonising belief system. Through the farming metaphor, ethnic and religious groups are portrayed as beneficiaries who can only prosper under certain conditions, namely embracing state tutelage and Chinese civilisation.

Contrastingly, while the values assigned to Chinese civilisation and culture are represented as sources of life and prosperity, religious extremism, terrorism and separatism are framed as forces of death and decay. Separatism is depicted both as a hotbed where religious extremism and terrorism take root and as a plague, reinforcing its negative moral evaluation while implying a rational justification for measures to protect prosperity. Once again, as a farmer, the Party is portrayed as responsible for ensuring the proper conditions for a fruitful harvest and, consequently, for preventing (or eliminating) threats – such as religious extremism – that endanger it.

Ethnic unity and cultural security: the role of family metaphors in Xinjiang's discourse

Family metaphors found in the discourse further reveal power structures reflected in farming metaphors. The importance of the Chinese civilisation and culture as “spiritual home” and the depiction of the nation as a family reflects on national building questions which date back to the offspring of the PRC. Even though originally inherited from the Soviet Union and Marxism-Leninism, the CPC built its own model of nationality to reflect China's context. Translated as “Chinese nation,” *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族) is a concept inherited by the CPC to integrate all 56 ethnic groups (the majoritarian Han and 55 ethnic minorities) into a single ethnically diverse nationality. This way, the discourse on *Zhonghua minzu* reinforces a sense of shared identity “... by virtue of their historical and cultural attachment to the nation and that this attachment is a long, glorious and immutable one” (Harrell 1996, 5, in Chu 2017).

Furthermore, the Party revived Confucian values through the *Zhonghua minzu* concept, framing it as a vast family where ethnic groups are depicted as brothers sharing common cultural roots. In traditional Chinese values, harmony among family members was a priority, regarding its division as undesirable (Guo 2019). The concept and its connection to traditional Chinese values helped the CPC deal with the difficult question of nation building in a culturally diverse nation, aiming to potentially prevent ambitions for ethnic independence and reinforcing in this way territorial integrity.

The relevance of family metaphors in the discourse reflects *Zhonghua minzu* as a central belief and value system. Since the publication of the first XJWP document in 2003, ethnic groups in Xinjiang have been described as contributors to the “great family of the Chinese nation” (SCIO 2003, 10), fostering sociopolitical emotional ties and contributing to the Party's affective legitimacy (Zhai 2023). Xinjiang is represented as the home for a variety of ethnic groups, emphasising the existing multiculturalism in the region while countering ethno-nationalist arguments for Xinjiang independence. The representation of ethnic groups as members of a single family is often related to the idea of joint efforts to build the nation. Furthermore, metaphorical expressions of China as

the “motherland” are particularly used in the context of separatism, fostering the idea of a collective, united protection against a common enemy.

In this family of the Chinese nation, the ethnic groups in Xinjiang are like brothers and sisters who work and live together and help each other out. They have guarded against foreign aggression, opposed separatist activities and safeguarded national unification. (SCIO 2019b, 11)

Family metaphorical expressions emphasise the affective dimension of hierarchical socio-political relations, amplifying their emotional impact. van Dijk's (2008) Ideological Square finds a reflection in this dichotomy between friends and enemies – or, in this case, family and outsiders – alienating those who question Xinjiang as an integrated part of China and, by extension, CPC leadership in the region. Territorial integrity becomes a personal matter through the emotional bonds behind these metaphors. Particularly interesting is the reference to Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC)¹¹ which, forming “flesh-and-bones ties” with ethnic groups in Xinjiang, shaped a “multi-ethnic family” on its own. Even though an exhaustive analysis of XPCC as key paramilitary agent for ethnic unity and border security in Xinjiang goes beyond the scope of this research, metaphor analysis infers its political relevance for the central government. Given the strong metaphorical representation of XPCC in XJWP (even having its own White Paper in 2014) and its role as promoter of ethnic unity, its disappearance from XJWP from 2015 seems remarkable.

While Chinese culture was in farming metaphors represented as fertile soil, in family metaphors it becomes represented as “embrace,” “bond,” and “(spiritual) home” since 2018, which also signals Xi's emphasis on cultural security and Chinese culture as one of his Five Identifications.

The Chinese culture is a bond that unites various ethnic groups ... the communication between and integration of different ethnic cultures has helped to form and develop the Chinese culture. (SCIO 2018, 2)

In different stages of history, various ethnic groups learned from each other ... who made further contribution to the development of the ethnic cultures of Xinjiang in the embrace of the Chinese culture. (SCIO 2018, 2)

The Chinese culture was created, carried forward and developed by all ethnic groups of China, and is a bond of ethnic unity and national unification. Facts have proven that ethnic cultures of Xinjiang are components of the Chinese culture, which is always the emotional attachment and spiritual home for all ethnic people in Xinjiang, as well as the dynamic source for the development of ethnic cultures. (SCIO 2018, 14)

We can infer that all these metaphors (e.g. Chinese civilisation and culture as “fertile soil” or “home,” as a “container,” or China as “family”) represent both spatial limitations – inside/outside – and an implied evaluation promoting social unity and common identity through dichotomous imagery. Particularly since the publication of *Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang* (SCIO 2019b), the external origin of some religions is emphasised through opposition to native Taoism and local beliefs.

China has long been a multi-religious country. In addition to several major religions that are structured in accordance with strict religious norms, a variety of folk beliefs are also popular in China. Among these, Taoism and local folk beliefs are native to China, while all other religions were introduced from foreign countries. (SCIO 2019b, 16)

In this context, religious extremism is related to separatism which, entering Xinjiang (and thus being categorised as an external threat), “soon blended with terrorism to stir up social unrest in the region, seriously undermining local stability and security (SCIO 2019a, 9). This way, by representing ethnic groups in Xinjiang as brothers and sisters and Chinese culture and civilisation as a spiritual home, this imagery frames religious extremism as an external threat to the family. The defence of the home (Chinese culture and civilisation) and the unity of the family (ethnic groups) aims at making it both moral and rational to apply ideational measures capable of reinforcing a shared identity against an external threat (religious extremists and separatists). As a result, like the farming metaphor, the Party is implicitly portrayed as a benevolent figure who protects the home and family bonds, ensuring social unity and harmony between ethnic groups. Under Xi Jinping, the pursuit of cultural security translates into the resurgence of ideational and political education to control religion, language and other ideational attributes of ethnic identity as a source of de-extremization. Once again reflecting on existing power relations, the Party assumes the task of guiding minority groups to properly understand that “... China and its civilisation were collectively created by the family of all China’s nationalities” (Klimeš 2018, 431). These representations are relevant because they reflect the ideology behind assimilationist policies in Xinjiang. While adaptation to Chinese culture and civilisation is represented as a precondition for the development and survival of ethnic cultures and religions, the elements that represent Chinese civilisation/culture remain relatively undefined.

This way, through the analysis of farming and family metaphors, we can unveil the underlying Party’s ideology schema (van Dijk 2013), which itself draws from its original understanding of national building in a multi-ethnic state as well as China’s classical thought. Furthermore, these metaphors represent group relations in dichotomic terms through both moral and rational evaluations, dividing participants in the discourse as providers, beneficiaries or threats. Thus, drawing on van Dijk’s Ideological Square and van Leeuwen’s legitimating categories of moral evaluation and rationalisation, metaphors project an image of participants in the discourse in a way that polemic measures like the VETCs are framed as a necessary response from the Party, which is implicitly depicted as the primary rational and moral guarantor of security.

The journey of modernization: political ideology and development as extremism prevention in Xinjiang’s VETCs

Castets (2024) delved into several elements related to this research, including ethnic and religious identities and the CPC’s challenge to accommodate these into a unifying discourse on Chinese civilisation and the Party’s model of modernisation (apparent from the early stages of the Party’s control over the Xinjiang region in the 1950s). This model of modernisation is based on the concept of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, indispensable to understand the journey metaphor in this section.

Deng Xiaoping’s Thought was added to the CPC’s Constitution in 1992 and, with it, Socialism with Chinese characteristics, marking the roadmap for a Marxist-inspired, tailored model of modernisation for China. To provide further context, it is first important to know that Party ideology is conceived in two components, “theory” and “thought”. While “theory” answers to the “universal truths” of Marxism-Leninism which provide China with

its worldview, “thought” is its application to China’s specific conditions which ultimately translates into specific policy (Chang 1996). Currently, the Party’s Constitution includes Mao Zedong’s Thought, Deng Xiaoping’s Thought and Xi Jinping’s Thought, marking a trace and evolution of the Party’s ideology according to China’s circumstances. Xi Jinping, particularly, has further adapted “... Marxism to the Chinese context ushering in a new era of Chinese modernization and governance based on the strengthening of the Party” (Peters 2017, 1300).

Metaphors representing development as a “journey” refer to “socialism with Chinese characteristics” as the correct path, which, guided by the CPC, will allegedly lead to a brighter future.

Under the firm leadership of the CPC and the central government, and with the generous support of the whole nation, the people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang have unswervingly followed the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, pursued ethnic equality, unity and development, practiced the system of ethnic regional autonomy, and brought about enormous changes in all areas north and south of the Tianshan Mountains (SCIO 2015, 25).

The metaphor of development as a “journey” contributes to a dichotomous imagery, where “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and the “Chinese path of development” – used as analogous terms for the CPC’s path of development¹²—are represented as the way forward in contrast to “backward” habits. These metaphors reflect the ideology of the central government, considering the official interpretation of development as superior (or more advanced).

We must develop and encourage secular, modern and civilized ways of life, and abandon backward and outdated conventions and customs. We must carry forward religious practices adapted to Chinese society, inspire various religions in China with core socialist values and Chinese culture, foster the fusion of religious doctrines with Chinese culture, and lead these religions, including Islam, onto the Chinese path of development. (SCIO 2019b, 19)

This aspect has been referred to by several scholars who have noted “Han chauvinism” within the Party (Han 2013; Sautman 1998). This study argues that while the Han element is unquestionable owing to demographic and historical reasons and thus places “Hanism” centrally within the current political ideology, the development question is rather related to Marxism – Leninism ideology and its adaptation by the CPC leadership since 1949. Therefore, even though these representations are implicitly Han, they are not focused on ethnicity but rather reflect political thought based on a specific model of development and modernisation that is implicitly associated with secular practices.

Overall, the Party is consistently depicted as the pre-eminent leader of the future and the main engine of modernity once again reinforcing the image of the Party as the only capable authority to lead the country. Hu Jintao asserted in 2006: “Only our Party can become the nucleus of power to lead the Chinese revolution, construction and reform, only it is able to bear the great trust of the Chinese people and the Chinese nationality...” (Hu 2006, in Brown 2012, 59). As such, the journey metaphor builds on prior metaphors that, following the Party’s worldview, aim at assimilating local ethnic and religious groups into a shared national identity derived from the Party’s ideology which, based on socialist models of modernisation, reinforces secularism.

In relation to this, despite the official reference to VETCs as counterterrorism and preventive measures against religious extremism, the journey metaphors and others

explained in this section reveal their role in advancing the Five Identifications of Xi Jinping as prevention of dissidence. In contrast to the imagery of socialism with Chinese characteristics as the correct path towards development and prosperity, trainees at VETCs are referred to as off-course and requiring guidance and education to abandon the wrong path of “terrorist crimes.”

Drawing on van Dijk’s Ideological Square, this imagery once again frames contrasting virtues of the Party’s leadership and economic model against those of religious extremists who, abusing individuals, lead them into a wrong path. The contextual analysis of these metaphors highlights the emphasis placed on the incapacitation of the affected and even refers to the effect of extremism on the people as “bewitchment,” reiterating both the perversion of the threat and its irrational and superstitious origin. Again, this categorisation fits into a complex metaphorical discourse in which the CPC represents modernity in contrast to elements considered retrograde and which, in this case, are represented as religious extremism.

Extremist ideas distort and contravene Islamic theology, and the extremists bewitch Muslims ... (SCIO 2015, 21)

Metaphors referring to VETCs as countering measures against terrorism and religious extremism emphasise another dichotomy between freedom and prison when referring to religious extremism as “mental shackles.” This metaphor not only aims to reverse accusations against the CPC of ethnic and religious repression in Xinjiang but also reinforces its image as the guarantor of the security and integrity of religious communities. According to the discourse, the mental alienation inflicted on believers by religious extremists requires an external action that restores a lost normality.

They [the trainees] thank education and training for turning them back from the way to terrorist crimes and helping them break free from the spiritual shackles of religious extremism. (SCIO 2019c, 11)

It is hard for some people who have been convicted of terrorist or extremist crimes to abandon extremist views, as their minds have been poisoned to the extent of losing reason and the ability to think sensibly about their lives and the law. Without necessary intervention measures it will not be possible for them to cast off the shackles of religious extremism, get back to normal life, and improve their prospects for a better future. (SCIO 2019c, 4)

A common thread is generated in which the false, irrational and pernicious mentality of religious extremism prevents its followers from advancing towards the socio-economic development and modernity provided by the CPC, directly affecting the participation of ethnic minorities in it.

Therefore, as socio-economic development is represented as an extended metaphor of “journey,” it becomes connected to anti-extremist discourse, acquiring a central legitimising (or delegitimising) function. Within this discourse, the State’s action in Xinjiang through VETCs is represented as both non-repressive and liberating, returning believers to a normal life, restoring their ability to use logic and even improving their mental health, as inferred from the metaphor of religious extremism as “mental poison.” As it was the case in farming metaphors and the representation of religious extremism as “plague” or “weed,” this metaphor implies deliberate poisoning by an external actor to harm its victim. This characterisation enables the CPC’s measures to be simultaneously

represented as a liberation and a mental antidote to the effects of an external actor, implicitly acquiring positive characteristics. This once again represents a case of van Leeuwen's rationalisation and moral evaluation as legitimating tools in the discourse.

To strengthen their psychological control over religious believers, extremist forces have incited people to boycott the standard spoken and written Chinese language and reject modern science. (SCIO 2019c, 4)

Through education and training, the trainees have improved their competence in the use of standard Chinese language and broadened their channels to acquire modern knowledge and information. They have realized that only by mastering standard Chinese language can they better adapt to contemporary society. (SCIO 2019a, 13)

Thus, education is embedded within a medical metaphor, representing a cure for the "symptoms and root causes" of the problem. While the official discourse emphasises "rehabilitation" measures, education centres implicitly acquire a preventive function. As such, the Chinese language plays a central role in the discourse, with a lack of linguistic skills in Mandarin leaving the population vulnerable to extremist ideology, thus justifying VETCs as a necessary, effective and legitimate measure by "expanding the channels" of knowledge and information of the "trainees". While language is an important element in promoting economic integration in multilingual nations, it can also be an act of identity (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985) and therefore an instrument to foster assimilation and support power structures (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991) – as explored by Dwyer (2005) in the context of language policies in Xinjiang, or at the national level by Beckett and Postiglione (2013).

Therefore, through a comparative analysis of the use of metaphors in official XJWP documents, it is possible to infer the dichotomous evaluation of ethnicity and religion as positive or negative, where people's identification with Chinese civilisation – in broad, imprecise terms – and CPC's model of development – socialism with Chinese characteristics – are depicted as preconditions to achieve prosperity. Despite the Party's legitimate concerns regarding stability in Xinjiang, international condemnation is heightened when broadly applied ideological measures – aimed at fostering the Five Identifications – are defined as measures aligned with the United Nations' framework for preventing religious extremism. These measures function as assimilation policies intended to address separatism and political dissent in Xinjiang, thereby attempting to safeguard territorial integrity and maintaining regime stability. Thus, even though the emphasis on the labels "terrorism" and "religious extremism" may be intended to appeal for international approval – or at least, prevent criticism –, it ultimately reflects a certain dissonance that raised the concern of a number of actors internationally¹³, reflecting the colliding value systems of China and liberal democracies – thus not fulfilling its persuasive role – while finding alignment with audiences who share similar ideological frameworks or maintain relationships of dependence *vis-à-vis* China (a discussion that goes beyond the scope of this paper).

Conclusions

The analysis of metaphors in the XJWP documents unveiled the Party's interpretation of ethnic conflict and threats to territorial integrity in Xinjiang, illuminating the ideological

origins of the measures referred to as anti-terrorist and preventive of religious extremism in front of an international audience.

First, this analysis provides a deeper understanding of the official anti-terrorism discourse in China by considering it as an integral part of a broader propaganda related to identity – specifically ethno-religious elements. The located and analysed metaphors reflect an existing discourse within the CPC, built upon specific theoretical foundations (currently Xi Jinping's Thought and the Five Identifications in particular). As such, metaphors within these discourses are cognitive instruments reflecting a particular interpretation of the world. Given its history, geography, and demography, the protection of territorial integrity in Xinjiang represents one of the primary concerns for the CPC (McNamee and Zhang 2019) and has made the region subject to rigid assimilationist policies. This case study serves to examine how the CPC perceives its legitimacy as contingent upon the public identification with its authority as the sole entity capable of upholding a specific set of values elevated to the status of identity markers – namely, Chinese civilisation, patriotism and socialism with Chinese characteristics.

As Charteris-Black (2004) asserted, it is essential to consider the persuasive dimension of political discourse and the function of metaphors within it. The metaphors analysed in this study reflect the moral evaluation of actors, actions and values and contribute to the construction of an image of the CPC and its various branches in Xinjiang as moral and rational and, thus, legitimate. As mentioned throughout the paper, these represent cases of van Leeuwen's rationalisation and moral evaluation as legitimating tools within political discourse, framing the Party as leaders and guarantors of a "bright" future which definition, characteristics and conditions are also firmly determined by the central government (Barabantseva 2009). Thus, it is possible to discern in the discourse an exercise of political power wherein the CPC defines the categories that determine the inclusion or exclusion of individuals. Metaphors infer the subordination of certain ethnic identity marks – such as language and religion – while identification with the Party and its core values are emphasised and prioritised. As such, metaphors reflect CPC's ideology and persuasive tools, bridging official discourse and political action. Ideological measures – such as VETCs – represent examples of ideational governance (Klimeš 2018) that, running parallel to the Party's interpretation of its own authority, ethnic affairs and national building aim at advancing a common identity that fosters territorial integrity and political stability.

Emphasis is placed on the idea that religions must "take root" in Chinese civilisation to ensure their survival, emphasising the intrinsic otherness and enmity represented by religious extremism and separatism as externally influenced anti-China forces. The depiction of terrorism and separatism in Xinjiang as rooted in an externally influenced, lethal and imprisoning ideology contrasts with images of Chinese civilisation as a spiritual home for ethnic cultures and religious people who "take root" in it. Therefore, besides exemplifying van Dijk's Ideological Square, metaphors reflect CPC policies in border regions like Xinjiang, which have long been viewed as gateways for foreign invasions and ideological threats (Hayton 2020). As such, the persuasive role of metaphors is more clearly reflected in the dichotomous representation of actors, with the CPC as the key leader and saviour, and victims represented as astray or mentally sick, which not only portrays religious extremism as a mental illness but also justify ideological measures – through education – that allegedly "reconduct" and "rehabilitate" victims. Besides the moral evaluation of the

Party in dichotomic terms against religious extremists, terrorists and separatists, counter-acting and preventive measures like the VETCs are framed as morally correct and necessary to restore stability in Xinjiang. This way, metaphors in the official discourse on Xinjiang reflect van Leeuwen's rationalisation and moral evaluation as legitimating tools for its counterterrorism measures in the region.

Overall, this paper has brought to the surface ideological foundations behind counterterrorism measures in Xinjiang. These ideological foundations and their impact on the Party's interpretation and response to the perceived threat are at the root of the debate and international criticism, despite the Party's efforts to shape a counterterrorism discourse that can find connections with an international audience. Metaphors reflect a hierarchical structure of social and cultural values, substantiating Lakoff and Johnson's assertion that "the majority culture usually gets to define fairness relative to its values, but these main cultural values change over time and are often subject to criticism by other cultures" (1980, 194). Therefore, the effectiveness of the Party's official counterterrorism discourse in persuading liberal audiences is limited by systemic dichotomies between the speaker and the audience, making the lack of agreement a fundamental issue. As Lakoff and Johnson affirm, "Reasonable objectivity may be impossible when there are conflicting conceptual systems or conflicting cultural values" (1980, 227).

Notes

1. ETIM was first included in the United States' "List of Terrorists and Groups Identified Under the amended E.O. 13224" on July 2, (2002) (note that ETIM was removed from the list in November 2020) and the "United Nations Security Council Consolidated List" in 2002 under UN Security Council Resolution 1390 (dated January 16, 2002).
2. Prior official name of the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. We maintain the same acronyms (SCIO) to refer to these publications along the essay.
3. Refer to Drinhausen and Legarda (September 15 2022).
4. Prior research showed how the UN's *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* (2015) was directly referred to within 2019 Xinjiang White Papers to legitimate preventive measures in Xinjiang (particularly the VETCs) as direct contributions to the international fight against extremism. Referring to van Leeuwen's legitimating categories, the UN's document was this way used as authority – role model –, aiming at fostering the international legitimacy of the Party's measures in Xinjiang. For further insight refer to García-Noblejas Floriano (2022).
5. BRI consists of a massive international project launched by Xi Jinping in 2014 to enhance infrastructure development and trade across the Eurasian plateau. Consult Clarke (2017) for further reference.
6. See Rodríguez-Merino's (2023) full work.
7. This research derives from a deep corpus-based CDA conducted between 2017 and 2020. It uses the official translation into English of XJWP published by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (SCIO) between 2003–2019 with the aim of considering their legitimating role in front of an international audience.
8. The KWIC tool presents a list of all the concordances of a given word within a corpus, providing an efficient tool to explore the context of relevant keywords (or metaphors, in this study).
9. This method has been widely applied, resulting an effective method for metaphor identification and analysis. Refer to Steen et al. (2010) for further reference.
10. No. 1 Central Documents are the first policy statement released by the CPC every year, stating key political priorities.

11. The XPCC is a State-established paramilitary corporation first funded in Xinjiang in 1954 with the aim of managing farming and industrial development in the region. For further insight refer to McMillen (1981) or Seymour (2000).
12. Different scholars have referred to the top-down model of development led by the regional government in Xinjiang.
13. A joint letter issued by 22 countries to the UN Human Rights Council during the 41st Session of the Council on July 8, 2019 reminded China of its "... obligations as a member of the UN Human Rights Council to 'uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights and fully cooperate with the Council'" (UN Human Rights Council 2019a). A subsequent response letter, signed by 37 countries, praised China's counterterrorism efforts (including vocational centres) (UN Human Rights Council 2019b).

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Appendix

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

CAQDAS: Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

CM: Candidate Metaphor

CMA: Critical Metaphor Analysis

CMT: Conceptual Metaphor Theory

CPC: Communist Party of China

ETIM: East Turkistan Islamic Movement

KWIC: Keyword in Context

PRC: People's Republic of China

SCIO: State Council Information Office

UN: United Nations

VETCs: Vocational and Education Training Centers

XCPP: Xinjiang Production and Constructions Corps

XJWP: Xinjiang White Papers

XUAR: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region