

# The Construction of Muslim Minorities Image and the Communication of National Image through Media Discourse A Case Study of China CGTNs Documentary on Xinjiang Uyghurs

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**ABSTRACT:** Nowadays, the Muslim community is under the spotlight. The ongoing international debate over Muslim minorities identities reflects the dilemma of their integration into non-Muslim modern multi-ethnic nations under the context of multiculturalism. One typical example is the heated debate between the West and China over Chinese Muslims, also known as Uyghurs, through media discourse. Western media, such as the BBC, claim that China assimilates and forces Uyghurs to integrate. The Chinese side, meanwhile, asserts that mainstream Western media reports are lies, smears, and fake. Facing the discourse challenges from the West, China applies media discourse to reinforce its understanding of Uyghurs in the international discourse system. The analysis reveals that the Chinese government has consciously aligned the image of Uyghurs with its Chinese national image, and building a real Xinjiang image on CGTN.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, along with the spread of globalization, expansion of modernization, and resurgence of nationalism, the identities of Muslim minorities have become a complex and contentious issue that has not yet received a unified answer from the host countries hence the ongoing controversy and debate. Which degree of ethnic diversity is acceptable? Should the Muslim minority assimilate or integrate? To what extent may or must immigrants share the mainstream values of the host nation, or even defend them, as some suggest? The entire world faces challenges in integrating Muslim minorities into modern multi-ethnic nations. The existence of debates regarding the identification of Muslim minorities underlines the identity dilemma of Muslim minorities, which has been further amplified and focused through media on an international stage. Alongside the media and political establishment throughout the ideological spectrum, the identities of Muslim Minorities have become the lens through which the vast majority of social issues are viewed.

China's ethnic governance policies towards the Uyghurs have provoked heated international controversy, with China and the West holding stances that are almost opposed. In the Western and Chinese media discourse, the images of Uyghurs are unexpectedly different. Western media, such as the BBC, claim that China assimilates and forces Uyghurs to integrate. The Chinese side, meanwhile, asserts that mainstream Western media reports are lies, smears, and fake. Facing the discourse challenges from the West, China applies media discourse to reinforce its

understanding of Uyghurs in the international discourse system. Accordingly, this paper intends to discover how China represents Uyghurs through media discourse, and the documentary named "*Rare Look into Xinjiang*" about Uyghurs published on CGTN, a global media platform owned by the Chinese government, serve as analyzing materials. The research question of this paper is: How Uyghurs are portrayed through CGTN's documentary "*Rare Look into Xinjiang*"? Discourse analysis serves as the research method of this paper to assess. The conclusion presents the call for greater scholarly attention to the representation of Uyghurs by China through media discourse.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Historical Review on Uyghurs

Currently, the Turkic and Muslim population residing largely in the northwest of the PRC is known as Uighurs (alternatively spelled as Uyghurs). Uighurs reside in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China's far western Xinjiang province, which is bordered by Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and India [1]. Uyghurs comprise around 45.2% of Xinjiang's population. According to WWF and the Urumqi city council, among other Uyghur sources, the number is between 15 and 20. Some Uyghur sources, such as WWF and the local administration of Urumqi, estimate the Uyghur population to be between 15 and 20 million [2]. Before turning to Islam in the fifteenth

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century, Uyghurs worshipped a variety of religions; they are now China's second-largest Muslim community. Although a small number of Uyghurs stay in mainland China and attend schools, do business, and engage in other activities, the vast majority of Uyghurs live in Xinjiang [3].

The Uyghur nationality was not recognized formally until the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, a succession of Chinese republics transformed Uyghur areas from a loosely held dependency under the Qing to a closely regulated, assimilationist, settler colony overseen by a Han Chinese-dominated bureaucracy. The Chinese government recognizes the Uyghurs as one of China's fifty-six official ethnic groups and refers to them as a minority on a regular basis [4]. Throughout history, Han Chinese have comprised the vast majority of China's population and have dominated in all aspects of development. The Han language, also known as Mandarin, is a member of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. Through coexistence, migration, and integration with diverse ethnic groups, the Han have developed the distribution characteristics of concentrated distribution in the Songliao Plain and the developed agricultural areas and cities of the Yellow River, Huai River, Yangtze River, and Pearl River, and have intermarried with local ethnic groups in border regions [5]. Han Chinese and Uyghur cultural traditions are distinct. First, Uyghurs are not physically similar to Han Chinese. Aesthetically, they resemble both East Asians and Europeans. Having converted to Islam in the ninth century, the majority of Uyghurs are Sunni Muslims. Uyghurs speak Turkic languages and eat halal diet, especially avoiding pork, which is a popular dish among Han Chinese. Pork is a favorite dish among Han Chinese [6]. Cultural and social differences are the source of ongoing interethnic conflict.

## **2.2. International debate over Uyghurs in media**

Given the number of media outlets and the generalized nature of the concept of China and the West, it is necessary to specify in this paper that two mainstream media outlets, the BBC and China's CGTN, chosen as representatives to present this debate, for the reason of the BBC's strength and contribution to this debate and the rationality of choosing CGTN for elaborating the case study in a better way. The West perceives China's Ethnic Minority Policies differently, especially in the United States. Significant differences show between China and the West in meanings of national identities, images, and positions, especially those about ethnic Minorities in China, are related to the particular events and the interactions between discourses, styles, or genres circulating in the news texts [7]. Between East and West, the Uyghurs are depicted exceptionally differently.

## **2.3. Uyghurs and Chinese national image in media discourse**

### *2.3.1. Uyghurs are Chinese*

According to a significant portion of Chinese literature, the Chinese government has devoted itself to building the identity of Xinjiang people as Chinese in the international arena through global media, public diplomacy, and other measures. The Chinese government's starting point for classifying Xinjiang people as Chinese is as follows for numerous reasons. First, the Chinese government believes Xinjiang to be an integral part of Chinese territory for historical reasons. According to the central government of the People's Republic of China, Xinjiang has been under Chinese control since the oldest dynasties in Chinese history, such as the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, until the formation of Modern China. The Uyghurs are an intrinsic component of the Chinese nation due to long migrations and integration [8]. Second, the Chinese government emphasizes that the cultures of the ethnic groups of Xinjiang, primarily the Uyghurs, are an intrinsic component of Chinese culture. More than two thousand years ago, the long-term interaction and integration of the cultures of the Central Plains and the West contributed to the formation of both the cultures of Xinjiang's ethnic groups and a pluralistic and unified Chinese culture. From the very beginning, the cultures of Xinjiang's ethnic groups have connected with Chinese culture [9]. The Chinese culture has always been the emotional support, spiritual home, and spiritual home of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang and the driving force behind their cultural growth. Third, from a religious standpoint, the Chinese government believes that in order to assist the Uyghur people in adopting a secularized and modernized civilized lifestyle and abandoning ignorant and backward stereotypes, it is necessary to continue the historical tradition of Chineseization of religion and to lead and integrate religious teachings with Chinese culture by utilizing socialist core values [10]. Taken together, the Chinese government perceives Uyghurs as Chinese out of its understanding of Xinjiang's history and considers Uyghurs consistent with the Chinese in terms of culture and identity.

### *2.3.2. Uyghurs, the mirror to reflect Chinese national image*

As an integral part of China's national image, the image of Uyghurs serves as a mirror that reflects China's image on the international stage [11]. Since 2008, international media attention and coverage of China's image building have increased. China suggests that in an era of globalization, foreign and domestic attention and coverage directly impact China's international reputation. As an integral part of China's national image, the image of Uyghurs serves as a mirror that reflects China's image on the international stage. The logistics of the Chinese government's identity construction of Uyghurs is that they are Chinese. China's identity construction of them in the media discourse serves to present the Chinese national image. That is to say, the images of Uyghurs and their survival represent both the Chinese and the national image. The images of Uyghurs are inseparable from the images of Chinese people as well as the nation. Much of the existing literature on Uyghurs views the

construction of Uighurs by China in media discourse from the standpoint of Uighurs and the West, while somewhat lacking in discourse analysis from China. Based on the research gap, this paper dismantles the Chinese government's understanding and how it constructs and represents Uighurs by adopting the Chinese government as the subject of discourse construction.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1. The construction of Chinese image

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the construction of Chinese image. Most of them more or less pointed out these three similar elements that explain what it means to be Chinese. According to Rae & Wang [12], being Chinese means being the people who love China as their motherland and adore the excellent traditional Chinese culture, who are courteous, honest, and committed to building China into a mighty nation. Finally, the Chinese people are descendants of the ancient Yan and Huang emperors. Atanassova-Cornelis [13] also points out the three elements above, yet more particularly from the perspective of foreign policy. She explains that there are significant variants of Chinese national identity by Chinese leaders' construction: as a victim (past), as a developing country (present), and as a great power (future). Schneider [14] explains that the construction of China's national image in China as much as elsewhere, is today adopted, filtered, transformed, enhanced, and accelerated through digital networks. Building Chinese National image cannot be accomplished without the assistance of the media. Along with the rapid development of information technology in the information age, the media environment has undergone a radical transformation, and new media are establishing a new mode of information dissemination due to their unparalleled influence [15]. This effect has eliminated the boundaries between traditional media, led to the integration of nations, industries, and communities, and transformed the new media into a potent instrument for constructing Chinese national identity.

### 4. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis is conducted as a tool to examine the documentary *"Rare Look into Xinjiang"* of Uyghurs on CGTN in 2020. Numerous fields, including media and communication and cultural studies, have used discourse analysis as a methodology. Discourse Analysis is a method for studying the use of language in social contexts. This method provides insight into how speech and texts help shape and reproduce social meanings and forms of knowledge [16]. As a socio-constructivist methodology, our conception of the world is consistently mediated by language and intentional practice rather than reflected. Discourse Analysis concerns questions such as: What was said? Who said it and how? It supports our comprehension of how truth is generated in particular. A typical research

question of discourse analysis is how does (a particular group or person) represented or portrayed by the author? Accordingly, discourse analysis works, in this thesis, on revealing how CGTN of media texts uses the language to achieve different intentional effects. Moreover, this thesis is concerned with the presentation of Uyghurs by China: for one thing analyzing Uyghurs' images to reveal their intentionally constructed identities characteristics. At the same time, on the other, it focuses on ideologies by digging under the surface of China's views. Overall, discourse analysis allows for examining how media texts are constructed and the intersection between discourse, subjects, and ideology.

There is no standard approach to studying texts but rather a variety of ways to proceed. Accordingly, in this thesis, I adopt a discourse analysis approach that combines different analytical tools according to different perspectives, drawing on different authors who have contributed to the field of discourse analysis of media texts, namely Hall [17] and Tonkiss [18]. As such, I outline five stages of discourse analysis, including (1) Subject and Subject position and (2) Identifying key themes and arguments. (3) Association & Variation, (4) Characterisation & Agency, (5) Emphasis & Silence.

### 5. ANALYSIS

In September 2020 CGTN released a eight-episode documentary titled *"Rare Look into Xinjiang"* (abbreviated as RLX). The documentary chronicles the lives of eight Xinjiang residents in mainland of China: Akeribek, Ulan, Gulkhair and her husband Batyal, Guljinit, Dorikhonjan, Ekna, Imin, and Amangul (the number of episodes corresponds to the order of the names). In the documentary, each of them discusses how they feel about working and living in mainland China.



Figure 1 A Still from the Documentary *"Rare Look into Xinjiang"*

#### 5.1. key themes and Arguments of RLX

Analysis of RLX shows repeated use of words and images in portraying Uyghurs. CGTN pays efforts to shape the image of Uyghurs into that of the Chinese, which is hard-working, helpful to family, and responsible. By establishing the identities of the eight protagonists, all working class, all employed in mainland China, and generally young. Their destinies are placed within the context of the wave of immigration since China's reform and opening, thereby reinforcing the status of the working class under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

### 5.1.1. Working class and Young

Table 1. shows all eight interviewees above are workers, and more precisely, migrant workers, who relocated from Xinjiang to mainland China: mainly in Guangdong Province and Jiangsu Province, China. They all work in factories, with seven of the eight interviewees employed in electronics factories and one in an appliances factory. Other than that, they are all concentrated between 19 and 32 years of age, except for one individual, Dolihunj (50-

year-old). Acryback, Aykinar, and Amangul, whose ages are not mentioned in the documentary, are described as young men or women. The age distribution and the repeated use of the keyword young reveal the producer's intent regarding the formation of youth characteristics. The interviewees displayed consistency in their employment status, workplace, and age, while the overlap is not coincidental but reflects the producers' intent when creating the image of Uyghurs.

**Table 1.** Information about the characters

Name	Age	Place of birth	Place of job	Occupation
Acryback	Young man	Akto County in Xinjiang's Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomo us Prefecture	Huizhou, Guangdong	Worker (electronics factory)
Ulan	20-year-old woman	Xinjiang's Ili Kazakh Autonomo us Prefecture	Nanjing, Jiangsu	Worker (electronics factory)
Gulhahir	26-year-old woman	Akqi County, Xinjiang's Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomo us Prefecture	Nanjing, Jiangsu	Worker (electronics factory)
Guljinit,	19-year-old woman	Xinjiang's Kashgar Prefecture	Hefei, Anhui	Worker (electronics factory)
Dolihunj	50-year-old man	Akqi County, Xinjiang's Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomo us Prefecture	Nanjing, Jiangsu	Worker (electronics factory)
Aykinar	Young woman	Xinjiang's Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomo us Prefecture.	Huizhou, Guangdong	Worker (appliances factory)
Imin	32-year-old man	Xinjiang's Kashgar Prefecture	Hefei, Anhui	Worker (electronics factory)
Amangul	Young woman	Xinjiang's Kashgar Prefecture.	Hefei, Anhui	Worker (electronics factory)

### 5.1.2. Hard working and helpful

Notable is that all of the interviewees are migrant workers; in other words, their identities are fixed within the working class, bolsters the message of laboriousness. In the documentary, each Uyghur mentions that coming to work in mainland China has brought them economic advancement and a change in their quality of life. However, all of these cannot achieve without hard work. Examples of quotes from five interviewees are as follows (The dialogues of the following characters are all excerpted from the above-mentioned documentary):

*Acryback (episode one): I will work hard and live a good life. If you don't make efforts, it's impossible to gain anything.*

*Ulan (episode two): I like the feeling of making a living through my own hard work. Making money is for myself, it is fine though I am tired.*

*Aykinar (episode six): I won't say even if I am tried.*

*Imin (episode seven): The family of Imin's fiancée is very satisfied with Imin for he proved himself to be a capable Fella who was able to make the fortune with his own efforts.*

*Amangul (episode eight): When I come back from work, I don't choose to play with my phone or watch TV or anything like other colleagues, I don't choose to be comfortable, I study Mandarin or reflect on what I did at*

*work today. Because I was hardworking and studious, my leader promoted me to team leader.*

Five Uyghur interviewees out of eight emphasize the significance of hard work and the manifestation of this trait in their hard work. The purpose of hard work is to obtain a better life, but what exactly is a better life? Here are the quotes from them for the answers:

*Ulan: I earned over 5,000-yuan 706 U.S dollars in wages, our local income is low, the highest is around 3,000 yuan (424U.S dollars) [...] Some people in my hometown admire me.*

*Gulhahir and her husband Bahtyar: At the factory in Nanjing, i learned many new skills and earned a much higher salary. With more money, i really want to go to Shanghai.*

*Imin: I will buy an apartment for my parents in the county, making their lives better too.*

*Dolihunjan: I want to buy clothes to my mom, and thanks for her hard work to raise us up.*

*Amangul: I gave my parents money, bought them dozens of sheep, and cattle, home conditions are much better than before.*

The improvement of economic situation and the ability to support their parents or children with more money is their standard answer for earning a better life. The subjects here are all coincidentally shaped by the author CGTN as people who love to help people, and these interviewees commonly express a desire to help their families by earning money from coming to mainland China.



## 5.2. CGTN'as the agency

CGTN is a media outlet dominated by and represents the voice of the Chinese government. RLX accordingly depicts the ideal image of Uyghurs from the Chinese government's standpoint. The agency here is the Chinese government, and it is in an active position to construct the images of Uyghurs through CGTN. The images of Uyghurs that the Chinese government wants to promote here are of the working class and young. According to the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, Xi Jinping stated that China is a socialist state governed by a democratic dictatorship of the people led by the working class and founded on an alliance between workers and peasants. The working class is the representative of China's advanced productive forces and production relations, and it is the Communist Party of China's class base. To govern for an extended period of time, the CPC must fully rely on the broad working class, ensure the working class's dominance, and give the working class its due as the dominant force [19]. At the same time, young people, as representatives of the working class, are treated as the most creative group in Chinese society. Representing the masses of youth, winning the masses of youth, and relying on the masses of youth is a critical guarantee for China's continued success [20]. The reinforcement of the workers' identity and featuring their general youthfulness in interviewees reflects the Chinese government's intention to place Uyghurs under Chinese ideology and the ideals of class struggle. Uyghurs are part of the vast working class in China and are closely linked to the survival and development of China.

## 5.3. Emphasis: A real Xinjiang

CGTN stated that RLX was released at a period when Western media were providing fake reports and comments on Xinjiang. Most Western media coverage of Xinjiang in recent years has been unfavorable due to a lack of information and distrust [21]. At the Third Central Symposium on Xinjiang Work, held on September 25 and 26, 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated, "We should tell the story of Xinjiang on multiple levels, in a comprehensive and three-dimensional manner, and vociferously publicize the stable situation in Xinjiang and the happy lives of the people living in peace and prosperity [22]." As a crucial component of China's national image, Xinjiang's image includes sensitive topics such as ethnicity, religion, and human rights and functions as a mirror to reflect China's image in the international arena. At the same time, Xinjiang's geopolitical location makes it a node: social growth or turbulence in Xinjiang will butterfly impact the rest of China, its neighbors, and the West [23]. The representation of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs through media discourse are, therefore, China's way of promoting the real China to counter the challenges from Western discourse narratives. Just as the Chinese government claims, "Through our combined efforts, we must demonstrate to the world that the China of today is a

developing, peaceful, and civilized nation. Such an image will benefit us and the entire world [24]."

## 6. CONCLUSION

Throughout this international debate on Uyghur identity, China's position is to include Uyghurs in the Chinese people system, portraying Uyghurs as an ethnic minority group that thinks of themselves as Chinese and is proud of China's development. The Chinese side actively promotes its self-understanding discourse in the international media reflects China's communication efforts in associating the image of the Uyghurs with the Chinese national image. The international debate regarding the identity of Uyghurs, in which positions and specific perspectives are held, has clearly constructed in specific cultural context, and deserves further attention to scholars and research.

## 7. AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

Both Xue Zhou and Jiaru Zheng contributed to the conception of the study; contributed significantly to analysis and manuscript preparation; performed the data analyzes and wrote the manuscript; and helped perform the analysis with constructive discussions.

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