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## **Ethnic Governance Through Patriotism: The Discursive Framing of Hui Identity in Contemporary China**

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# **Ethnic Governance Through Patriotism:**

## **The Discursive Framing of Hui Identity in Contemporary China**

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## 1. Introduction

Under the Xi Jinping leadership, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has intensified its efforts to promote national unity, and ideological loyalty through reforms in education, religion, and ethnic governance (Zhao, 1998; Wang, 2013). Patriotism is a key concept in this process, as it extends deeply into religious and ethnic spheres. While the concept of patriotism has played a continuous role in the history of the CCP, recent policies reflect its rearticulation and intensification as a political tool to regulate diversity. This is particularly visible in the governance of Hui Muslims, a population who is categorized as both an ethnic minority and a religious one, which places them at the intersection of ethnic, religious, and ideological state projects.

This thesis is centered around the research question “how do recent state policies under Xi Jinping construct Hui ethnic and national identity through patriotic discourse?”. More specifically, the focus of the research is to understand the mechanisms through which patriotic discourse is mobilized in official texts. Texts which aim to redefine permissible boundaries of Hui ethnic and religious expression according to the Party’s goals and values. While recent scholarship has researched the securitization of Islam in China (Byler, 2021; Smith Finley, 2019), the Hui have generally remained understudied due to the fact that their interaction with state power or with the mainstream Chinese society is generally perceived as harmonious. This study challenges this view by demonstrating that the Hui, who before were portrayed as the Muslim “model minority” by the state (Gladney, 1991), are increasingly a target of policies that reconstruct Islam aligned to patriotism.

The state's approach to religious affairs is generally directed by the concept of Sinicization (中国化, *zhongguohua*), which refers to the process of adapting religious doctrine

and practice to socialist values and Chinese cultural and political norms. Although the term suggests a primarily cultural assimilation goal, many scholars argue that it mostly deals with a process of political domestication under the guise of harmoniously adapting religious communities to the Han mainstream society (Yang, 2021; Ji & Xuan, 2024). Adding to this, Sinicization of Islam in specific, is not concerned merely with regulating religious practice, its implications expand into the construction of a permissible way to express identity for the Islamic community in China.

This thesis argues that recent state policies under Xi Jinping construct Hui ethnic and national identity through patriotic discourse that frames patriotism as both a moral and legal obligation. This patriotic duty comprises loyalty to the Party, adherence to socialist values, and identification with the Chinese nation. Within this framework, the legitimation of Islam is conditional and based on following patriotic values. As Hui identity is closely tied to Islamic practice, policies that regulate religion also shape how part of Hui identity can be expressed. This results in a dual expectation: while all citizens must demonstrate patriotic loyalty, Hui individuals must additionally undertake the Sinicization of Islam as a patriotic task. Patriotic discourse, thus, imposes boundaries on Hui identity along two dimensions, national-political loyalty and religious conformity.

To reach this argument, the thesis analyzes the discursive framing of patriotism, and the positioning of Sinicization of Islam within patriotic discourse. Both themes are present in the four key policy texts that form my primary sources, those being the Patriotic Education Law (2023), the Joint Initiative on Studying, Publicizing, and Implementing the Patriotic Education Law to Inherit and Promote the Spirit of Patriotism (2024), the Five-Year Plan for Deepening the Sinicization of Islam (2023-2027), and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Religious Affairs Regulation (2023). These documents offer different layers of the state

discourse apparatus, including national and local legislation, religious and educational regulation policies. Altogether, they provide insight into how the Party seeks to discursively shape religious and ethnic subjectivities in a manner that aligns with its political goals.

Building on the theoretical premise which argues that discourse is a form of power that shapes social realities and is shaped by them (Foucault, 1978; Fairclough, 1992), this thesis positions Chinese policy discourse as a key mechanism through which the state disseminates ideology, moral hierarchies, and constructs normative identities. By using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study explores how policy texts discursively frame patriotism, not as a mere emotional attachment to one's nation, but as a moral and legal duty, and as an indicator of ideological conformity for religious groups.

Hence, the study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions of ethnic governance, religious policy, and ideological discourse in contemporary China by focusing on a relatively understudied ethnic minority, the Hui. The thesis adds nuance to the notion of the Hui as a relatively well-integrated ethnic minority, when in comparison with the Uyghur or Tibetans that the CCP regards as "unruly" groups, by revealing how Hui identity is increasingly regulated and delimited by patriotic language. Additionally, the analysis of official policies allows for the study to focus on state discourse rather than on state coercive tools, which by itself highlights the sometimes subtle, yet powerful ways through which ideology operates and is reflected onto reality.

The remainder of the thesis is organized as follows. Starting with the literature review chapter, which focuses on two scholarship research themes: Hui identity formation in China, and ideological governance under Xi Jinping. The existing academic works on these topics allows the thesis to have a strong foundation before progressing into the analysis. Following the literature review, the theoretical framework and the methodological approach for the

analysis is outlined. In this section the thesis' primary sources will be further detailed so as to understand how they contribute to the main argument of the thesis. Next, serving as an anchor for the analysis, is a brief contextual section that sets the political and historical background in which the policies in question were issued.

The following chapter is where the analysis of the state policy texts that serve as primary documents will take place. Here, Critical Discourse Analysis is used so as to dissect the underlying mechanisms through which state goals are enacted. This key chapter is divided in three sub-chapters which will first focus on the framing of patriotism in state issued documents, followed by dissecting how the Sinicization of Islam is positioned as a patriotic duty, and lastly, there is the discussion of how the recent developments of religious and ethnic affairs management intersect with the duty of patriotism and constructs Hui identity through delimiting boundaries for its expression in policy texts.

The sixth chapter is primarily focused on discussing findings that derive from the analysis and intersect them with existing scholarship on the topics in question, which allows for the formulation of the main argument of this thesis, mentioned above. The thesis' last chapter corresponds to a reflection over this research which aims not for the conclusion of this discussion, but intends to open doors for future academic research that further illuminates the study of the dynamic and ongoing process of negotiation of Hui identity in contemporary China.

## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter reviews existing literature that is relevant to the central question of this thesis: "How do recent state policies under Xi Jinping construct Hui ethnic and national identity

through patriotic discourse?” So as to explore this inquiry, the literature review is focused on two major themes: research on the construction of Hui ethnic and religious identity within the framework of Chinese governance, and second, studies on patriotic discourse and ideological control under Xi Jinping.

The aim of this chapter is to situate this research on ongoing academic debate about how the Chinese state currently shapes Hui ethnic and national identity through patriotic discourse present in educational and religious policies. Thus, this literature review explores China’s strategy for the regulation of ethnic minorities, particularly those that target the Hui. Hence, the analytical lens in upcoming chapters is the state-driven representation of the Hui.

In order to do so, it is imperative to understand the role of education in fostering national identity and state discourse. Most of the literature in this field focuses on the mainstream Han-majority perspective or, at most, on the more politically sensitive dynamics between the state and Uyghurs or Tibetans. Hui communities are often understudied due to a perceived, but not always reflective of reality, harmonious relationship with state power.

The chapter begins by reviewing literature on Hui identity formation and its intersection with religious practice and state policy. Thereafter, it will focus on patriotic education and ideological work under Xi Jinping, emphasizing how education serves as a key governance tool of national integration. Throughout, the chapter will highlight studies that approach identity as constructed through discourse and policy, rather than as fixed or purely social derived.

## **2.1. Hui Identity in China: Ethnicity, State, and Religion**

Among the 56 ethnic minority groups in China, ten are institutionally categorized as Muslims, Hui being one of them. The Hui ethnic group is composed of many diverse

communities and their historical background in China can be traced down to the 13th century (Gui, 2016). These Muslims were immigrants from Islamic countries that reached China in various waves of immigration, meaning that the Hui did not share the same nationality originally. Most of these immigrants were soldiers or merchants and presented a high level of mobility throughout China, which also explains the reason why Hui communities nowadays are dispersed throughout all provinces in China. Furthermore, scholars (Gladney, 1991; Gui, 2016) tend to agree that Hui communities have very high adaptability skills. Such apparent acculturation within Chinese society leads other Muslim ethnic minorities to consider Hui as “Hanified” and separate from Muslim minorities.

In this section, the literature review will cover the elements that take part in Hui’s ethnic identity formation. Afterwards, having in mind Hui’s history, the chapter will review existing scholarship on Hui’s “dual identity” - the ethnic identity and the national identity - that highlights Hui’s flexibility in negotiating their ethnic minority within the boundaries set by their national identity.

### **2.1.1. Hui Ethnic Identity Boundary Formation**

In the 1950’s, the Chinese state put into action the state-led ethnic identification campaign. The categorization of people into ethnicities was inspired in Joseph Stalin’s objective four criteria to define ethnicities’ boundaries, those being sharing a common ethnic language, having a common native land, holding a similar socioeconomic status in society, and sharing cultural customs. Using the Soviet theory to categorize Hui as an ethnicity, they would fail to meet three out of four criteria. Gladney (1991) affirms that when the Chinese state was categorizing ethnicities and defining their criteria, some of them might have been “invented”.

Taking Hui as an example, their origins trace back to multiple waves of immigration of different Muslim ethnicities. Due to this ethnic variety, prior to Hui’s categorization they hardly

recognized themselves as one single ethnic group (Gui, 2016). Not sharing a common ethnic language, or even a native land in the past or present, adding to the fact that individuals from Hui ethnicity share different social and economic status - from urban elite to rural low economic class, - only distinctive cultural practices seem to, at first glance, serve as an unifying ethnic element. Hence, the main element that could have united them would be religion or existing as Chinese Muslims.

Regarding their religious identity, both urban and rural groups generally affirm to feel connected to their Islamic faith, however, according to Turnbull (2016), discrepancies concerning the meaning of Hui-Muslim identity authenticity stand, starting from the remarkable dichotomy between urban and rural Hui. The urban Hui communities prioritize ethnicity to define themselves as Muslim and part of the Hui, since they are linked to a, rather imagined, Arab past. Contrasting with this, the rural Hui state that ethnicity is irrelevant, only faith in Islam and religious practice can be linked to Hui-Muslim authenticity. Nonetheless, when mentioning Islamic faith as a defining feature in Hui's identity, Gui (2016, p.22) states in accordance with Turnbull and affirms that "although Islamic culture is developing continuously, it is the core and a necessary component, but not all-defining for Hui Muslim culture".

This proves that although religious faith and practice can serve as a shared ethnic element that unifies Hui, it is not a static feature among the group, and certainly not enough to demarcate Hui ethnicity boundaries by itself.

Fredrik Barth (1969), an anthropologist, argues that ethnic identity can not be defined by such objective cultural traits, as religion for instance. Instead, it is defined through social interaction and creation of boundaries between groups. However, Barth's relational approach can not be fully applied in the Hui case since their ethnic demarcation from other groups was not a completely natural, social process of ethnic boundary making. Rather, it was an

institutionalized ethnic classification led by the state that aided in delimiting their ethnic identity.

Still, even if Barth's theory is not universally applicable in Hui's case, Islamic practice, in whichever form it is, from mosque attendance to eating habits, takes part in demarcating boundaries between "us" and "them". Barth (1969, p.15) states that "the identification of another person as a fellow member of an ethnic group implies a shared criteria for evaluation and judgment", so religious practice is undoubtedly a form of recognition within the group.

Summarizing, there are two main elements that group Hui together as an ethnic group. The first one is religious faith and practice, even if adherence to Islam is widely variable within the group, it can still be considered as a distinguishing feature that socially separates them from non-Muslim groups. Their Muslimness, allied to their experience of living as Hui in Chinese society, creates a sense of shared past and sense of destiny that not only acts as a Hui unifying element, but also distinguishes them from other Chinese Muslim groups (Lipman, 2011). In addition to religious markers, cultural practices such as food taboos or halal cuisine are visible elements in everyday ethnic boundary making (Gui, 2016).

The second boundary making element is state categorization and historical institutionalization. Even though it is not a natural process of constructing ethnic identity, as described by Barth (1969), it definitely takes part in constructing a shared historical memory that allows for passive inheritance of identity. The feeling of belonging to Hui because, institutionally, one *is* Hui is what allows for non-practicing Hui individuals to feel like they are ethnically Hui. In Hui's case, ethnic identity and religious identity are separate and not always overlapped. One is not Hui because they are Muslim, and one is not Muslim because they are Hui (Turnbull, 2016).

According to both Turnbull's (2016) analysis of her experience of living among Hui and Drewes's (2016) interviews, despite the apparent growing assimilation into the mainstream

Chinese society, religion is still a core element of Hui identity formation. Understanding these identity boundaries is essential for analyzing how state religious education policies interact with them. Only then can we gain insight into how Hui communities balance their ethnic identity with the systematic enhancement of nationalism and national identity that is known to be present in recent state projects.

Existing works on the Hui tend to lack an empirical study on Hui's perspectives on their ethnic identity and national belonging. It goes without saying that one of the main reasons for this is the limitations for fieldwork in China. However, it is also true that the Hui are a highly diverse group that is present in all provinces in China, both in rural and urban contexts. So, conducting research on such a complex ethnicity runs the risk of falling into generalization. To avoid this, this study does not claim to cover all Hui experiences, instead it is focused on existing ethnographies and other secondary sources that show how Hui identity is negotiated. While not aiming for thorough representativeness, this study highlights the plurality and contextual nature of Hui subjectivities.

### **2.1.2. Hui Dual Identity in the Context of Interaction Between Hui and State Power**

This sub-chapter aims to explore the ways in which the Hui ethnic group has engaged with state institutions, discourse, and ideology. Through the analysis of the interaction between Hui and state power, it will be possible to gain insight on the Hui's constant identity negotiation that gave birth to a "dual identity", a concept that many scholars that research the Hui agree on.

The interaction between Hui and the state starts with the engagement with formal institutions, such as the China Islamic Association (CIA) and ethnic affairs commissions. The CIA is the official organization that mediates between the Chinese state and Chinese Muslim groups, also maintaining the role of supervising Islamic religious affairs and ensuring that it

aligns with state discourse. Notably, the CIA leadership is constituted in large part by Hui individuals. Glasserman (2016) argues that this Hui bias is most likely due to the Hui's reformist approach to Islam, which by consequence, increases compatibility and adaptability to the state's efforts on the Sinicization of Islam. He reiterates, "the CIA is a principally scriptural modernist organization, not a principally Hui one" (Glasserman, 2016, p.49), nonetheless, the organization increasingly strengthens Hui portrayal as the "model minority Muslims".

Historically, the Hui-state relationship has been fairly harmonious in comparison with other Chinese Muslim groups' interaction with the state, such as the Uyghur. Having this in mind, some state discourse present in the CIA curriculum does not represent all Muslim groups' historical memories. For instance, the Muslim "fine patriotic tradition" (爱国主义的优良传统) is promoted in CIA curricula, however, some Muslim ethnic groups do not share such tradition of harmonious alignment with the Party nor do they sense a harmonious relationship with the state.

This comes to argue that the Hui ethnic bias present in state institutions creates conflicts within the Chinese Muslim spheres. However, their closer and more harmonious relationship with the state, that arises as consequence from compliance in adapting Islam to nationalist discourse, leads to a "dual identity", as argued by Gladney (1991, 1998). Gladney explores the dynamic manner in which Hui frame their ethnic identity in an assimilatory way that aligns with national identity. He also defends that it is precisely this dual identity, that is both Hui and Chinese, the reason why the Chinese state does not see them as a challenge to the promotion of patriotic ideology. Meyer (2012) shares the same argument by stating that it is Hui's ethnic proximity to Han culture and integration in Han society that leads to the creation of a harmonious relationship with the state.

However, recent developments under the Xi Jinping government have challenged this

earlier dynamic that Gladney and Meyer frame. The state increasingly imposes ideological control over Muslim religious life and expression of culture (Byler, 2021; Smith Finley, 2019), which suggests a change for Hui communities. The dual identity that before facilitated their acceptance and framing as a “model minority”, now incites the state to promote deeper securitization policies based on religious practice rather than ethnic identity (Gonul & Rogenhofer, 2019). While earlier religious policies that targeted Islam did not affect them as severely because they were portrayed as the assimilated and loyal ethnic minority, after this development, religious affairs regulations started to target them because they are Muslim, shifting the Hui portrayal into a potentially dangerous ethnic minority.

Concerning the everyday negotiation of power, Hui communities tend to avoid the politicization of religion by keeping religious affairs as part of their private life. As such, Hui integration within state power institutions, like the CIA, allows for the creation of a mechanism that reaffirms political-legal identity without openly politicizing religion.

Gui’s (2016) concepts of political-legal identity and cultural-psychological identity become important lenses to understand how this complex relationship between Hui and the state acts in favor of the harmonious negotiation of power and identity. The former is related to formal aspects of identity that are defined by state institutions, such as the recognition of ethnic groups within the legal system. The latter is shaped by daily cultural and religious practices, and it reflects how individuals perceive themselves within society. Gui (2016) argues that Hui’s cultural-psychological identity is more deeply rooted than their political-legal identity.

Other scholars have argued in this direction too, such as Turnbull (2016) and Drewes (2016), who show that even though not all Hui individuals actively practice their faith, they often still strongly identify as Muslim. The cultural-psychological identity is internalized and enacted in social circles, such as families or neighborhoods. Furthermore, although ethnic

categorization is initiated by the state, it still affects Hui's self-perception and consolidates their cultural-psychological identity. Hence, Hui cultural-psychological identity is better consolidated as it is *felt* instead of simply *assigned*.

Additionally, when analyzing Hui political-legal identity, we could argue that the existence of state-led Sinicization efforts implies that their political identity is not fully consolidated among Muslim ethnic groups and is in need of systematic reinforcement. Nonetheless, Gui (2016, p. 63) argues that, overall, Hui communities have a "stable internal structure" due to their well-rooted cultural-psychological foundation and a "dynamic subjective construction" by means of political-legal adaptation over time.

Hence, Hui-state interaction involves accommodation and constraint, meaning that engagement with religious, educational, and political institutions does not necessarily erase or negate Hui ethnic identity. Instead, this engagement reframes it within the context of patriotic values. This comes to argue in favor of Hui dual identity formation. Accommodation and constraint is also present when discussing the expression of ethnic characteristics that shifts over time and across regions, meaning that the relationship between ethnic identity and national identity is not static. Hui's interaction with state power as well as the state's implementation of ethnic-religious policies are the main factors that come into play in the negotiation and recalibration of identity.

Thus, Hui dual identity fits in this context as both a target of ideological reshaping - through the strengthening of their Chineseness and the softening of their Muslimness, - and also as a lens through which we can analyze the state's broader attempt of reconstructing acceptable boundaries for identity.

## **2.2. Ideological Governance and Patriotism in Xi Jinping's China**

### **2.2.1. Education and Religious Affairs Regulation under Xi Jinping's Leadership**

In the aftermath of the 1998 Tiananmen Square protests, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faced a legitimacy crisis and a loss of ideological cohesion. As a strategic initiative to recalibrate state ideology and reassert the Party's authority, the CCP shifted its reliance on Marxist ideology to a narrative that emphasized China's historical victimization by foreign powers (Wang, 2012).

Additionally, this new course of action repositioned the focus on the Party's role of national rejuvenation when faced with such political conjuncture (Wang, 2012). Constituting part of this nation-wide and multi-dimensional initiative, as of 1991, the Patriotic Education Campaign (PEC) started taking effect. Its main goals constituted of guiding an education reform according to the main guidelines outlined in the foundational Notice on Fully Utilizing Cultural Relics to Conduct Patriotic and Revolutionary Traditional Education (1991)<sup>1</sup> and on the Outline for Conducting Patriotic Education (1994)<sup>2</sup> both issued by the CCP Central Propaganda Department.

The PEC reinforced ideological control and solidified patriotism in education with the goal of enhancing national unity under socialist values. Its guiding ideology is determined by the CCP, according to the state discourse in play. Its principles are guided by Marxism-Leninism ideology, Maoist thought, Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening up general guidelines, and Xi Jinping's Socialism with Chinese characteristics. Recently, after the Outline for Implementing Patriotic Education in the New Era (2019)<sup>3</sup>, Socialism with Chinese characteristics became the main ideological framework.

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<sup>1</sup> 关于充分运用文物进行爱国主义和革命传统教育的通知 (1991)

<sup>2</sup> 爱国主义教育实施纲要 (1994)

<sup>3</sup> 新时代爱国主义教育实施纲要 (2019)

Evidently, the PEC does not overlook religious education, considering that religion has the power of fostering narratives other than the one the state attempts to construct. That is to say, religious communities may develop strong identities linked to their religious belief, such as Uyghur communities in Xinjiang (Gui, 2016). Such kind of religiosity can compete with socialist values and put national identity as secondary to ethnic or religious identity, something that the CCP wants to avoid (Holder, 2016; ul Ain, 2018). Furthermore, some religious beliefs such as Islam or Christianity are more connected to foreign influence, which could undermine a Chinese state-centered narrative. Thus, apart from focusing on fostering a scientific materialistic and socialist ideological framework in school curriculum, the PEC is also concerned with shaping religious teachings into a state approved framework.

In analyzing how modern secular states regulate religious affairs, José Casanova's (1994) approach on the reconceptualization of secularism is useful. He argues that modern nations do not seek the elimination of religion, instead they aim for its regulation. They demarcate where religious practice belongs in society, usually in private life, and how they seek the differentiation of secular spheres from religious institutions. In the Chinese context, Casanova's theory is relevant since religious policies during the PEC period sought to redefine religion as a private affair. However, the Chinese case also falls into Casanova's critique that secularism can also be used to shape religion so as to secure ideological conformity.

Religious policies that followed after the recalibration of state narrative aim to remove religious faith and practice from public life and shape its permissible boundaries, for instance in regard to what counts as "legal" religion. The question here is, are these post-1989 regulations a turning point in state policies or are they part of a longer trend in governance?

Since the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Chinese state has kept in mind the religious issue. Throughout its history, the CCP formulated diverse courses of action regarding how to handle religion, varying from the Cultural Revolution's restrictive laws

to a less rigid approach after the Reform and Opening Up policies (Gonul & Rogenhofer, 2019). According to Marxism-Leninism ideology and Maoist thought, religion is considered a hindrance to society's socialist development. Nonetheless, China's Constitution of 1982 has allowed for constitutional freedom of religious belief in private life. In the "Opinions and Basic Policies on Religious Affairs in Socialist China" of 1982<sup>4</sup>, the Party also acknowledges past mistakes regarding the management of religious practices, despite using the Gang of Four as a scapegoat, and aims for a less restrictive course of action in this field in the future.

Considering this context, while it is true that the CCP rule is centered on a long tradition of managing belief systems, according to Brady (2008) it is more accurate to view the PEC educational reforms as part of a strategic ideological recalibration after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. Thus, post-1989 educational and religious policies are inserted in an attempt to re-legitimize CCP rule and regain control over ideological narratives, especially among the youth (Brady, 2008; Wu, 2017).

### **2.2.2. Religious Affairs Management Under Xi Jinping**

Scholars generally agree that "centralization of control over all domains of governance can be seen as a defining feature of Xi Jinping's leadership" (Gonul & Rogenhofer, 2019 p.45). Compared to Hu Jintao, Xi has also been more strict concerning China's religious and cultural traditions, linking their practice with loyalty to the Party (Cook, 2017). Under Xi's leadership social organizations that are independent from the Party are controlled since they could undermine the Party's authority (NCHRD & HUIF, 2023).

Recently religious policies under Xi's government increasingly focus on the Sinicization of religion under the guise of encouraging the harmonious assimilation of religious

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<sup>4</sup> 关于我国社会主义时期宗教问题的基本观点和基本政策 (1982)

communities into the socialist society. Although the Sinification of religion might have originated from official ethnic and cultural nationalism, scholars (Yang, 2021; Ji & Xuan, 2024) tend to agree that it does not deal exclusively nor primarily with cultural assimilation. The primary goal of the Sinification of religion is the political domestication of religion, rather than the promotion of a superior Han culture.

According to Gonul & Rogenhofer (2019), the intensification of Sinicization policies targeting the religious sphere is part of a recalibration of patriotic discourse - one that has evolved since the post-Tiananmen protests to reinforce ideological conformity. Such renewed emphasis on ideological unity has had significant implications for ethnic minority communities, particularly those whose identities are shaped by religious affiliations. As Gonul & Rogenhofer (2019) highlight, the increasing Sinicization of religion is framed as a national security imperative. Sinicization entails aligning religious doctrine and practice with socialist values, and simultaneously handling separatist or extremist movements.

This new set of policies targets religions that are generally associated with foreign influence, such as Islam. The regulations serve the purpose of delimiting religious expression to state-defined norms of national identity and political loyalty. Following these goals, a series of regulatory interventions were put in practice, particularly in areas presenting a large concentration of Muslim communities. These policies include, but are not restricted to, the replacement of Arabic script with Mandarin Chinese in mosques and other religious buildings, restrictions on independent or private religious education, strict supervision of religious education that should prioritize the dissemination of patriotic values over religious ones, prohibition on involvement of minors in religious programs, among others. (NCHRD & HUIF, 2023)

As discussed on sub-chapter 2.1.2., the characterization of Hui as a “model minority” has evolved along with shifts in state narrative. Prior to the Xi Jinping era, ethnic identity was the

primary criterion used to assess potential threats to national security. In the current political climate, however, religious practice, specifically Islam, is the primary marker in this distinction. Previously, Islamic faith together with perceived cultural assimilation framed Hui as a model minority and gave them privileges like greater religious freedom, when compared with the restrictions Uyghur faced. Whereas now Islamic faith is used to classify the Hui as a potential security threat (Gonul & Rogenhofer, 2019).

This new classification method is increasingly visible in Hui-specific restrictions that involve social media censoring, persecution of Hui or Muslim intellectuals, public and private life monitoring, community relocation programs under the guise of “poverty alleviation”, and other forms of silencing, assimilation, and restriction (NCHRD & HUIF, 2023).

### **2.2.3. Constructing Belonging Through Ethnic Representation**

The multiplicity of ethnic consciousness and variety of historical memories among ethnic communities still hinders the construction of the desired nation-wide sense of belonging. Naturally, an Uyghur community living in Xinjiang experiencing a certain degree of restriction from religious policies - later mentioned -, does not share the same sense of belonging to China as a Han Chinese community in central Beijing. Various factors, such as geographical isolation and state policies, influence these communities' experiences when living in contemporary China. While the former is likely to experience a sense of alienation from the broader Chinese national identity and separation from the state power structure, the latter strongly identifies with this imagined community.

The same way, the aforementioned Uyghur community' experiences will differ from the one of an urban Hui community. Gladney (1991) highlights that, even though both are Chinese Muslim groups, historically they have distinct experiences regarding what it means to “be

Chinese”. Hence, apart from the contrast between Han Chinese and other ethnicities, a varying degree of sense of belonging is also felt among the various ethnic groups.

Having this issue in mind, patriotism is a key element in the Chinese state project of nation building. As seen before, it serves not only the goal of legitimizing the Party's authority, but it is also useful to construct a cohesive national identity that is aligned with state narratives. In this context, patriotic education or policies that aim to reconstruct religion to fit in a patriotic framework act as part of a strategic discourse that defines the boundaries of “loyalty” and “modern”.

Drawing on Anderson’s (2006) concept of nations as “imagined communities”, we can argue that nations are not natural entities, rather they are socially constructed. National identity is produced through institutional mechanisms, such as education. Hence, national education systems, such as the one the PEC mapped out, foster historical narratives that often flatten ethnic, regional, and religious differences by producing a homogeneous, secular, standardized national memory (Anderson, 2006).

To understand how education acts as a vehicle for ideological control, it is imperative to recall Althusser’s (1971) concept of Ideological State Apparatus. He defends that educational institutions do not simply disseminate knowledge, they function as part of an ideological project that, in the Chinese case, aims to shape national belonging, enhance national unity, and reinforce state legitimacy.

Just as education can boost nationalism and consolidate a sense of national belonging through dissemination of patriotism, it can also act as a tool for visual governance. Schein (1997) and Golik (2014) build on this by demonstrating how visual representation of ethnic minorities in school textbooks shape their self perception and Han Chinese perception of them. In school curricula ethnic minorities are reduced to rustic folklore, and such stereotypical gaze

serves the purpose of enhancing national unity. According to Golik (2014), these simplifications present in school curricula reduce differences among ethnic groups to “colorful costumes”, meaning that this portrayal constructs the idea that all ethnicities in China share the same national identity. Additionally, it also suggests that the only element that differentiates between groups are their cultural practices - which for ethnic minorities are framed as harmless and joyful in a rustic way.

In addition to portraying ethnic minorities as excluded from modernity while framing Han Chinese as modern and advanced, this representation produces a contradiction. Although religious practice and the expression of ethnic culture are often restricted in daily life, these very differences are selectively celebrated within state discourse. It is this selected visibility that reinforces official narratives of national and ethnic unity. In this context, ethnic minorities are not invisible, rather they are rewritten (Schein, 1997).

It is in this sense that this study argues that state policy documents are not neutral or merely descriptive. Deep rooted power relations are present in these texts as they function to construct social realities, categorize populations, and define acceptable or legal forms of behavior and beliefs (Fairclough, 1992). Within my primary sources this is visible, as patriotic discourse is woven into educational policies. Similarly, religious policies invoke patriotic themes to define “acceptable” forms of religious practice and faith. State initiatives operationalize this discourse through community surveillance, patriotic education campaigns, such as the PEC, the promotion of “model minorities”, and other channels.

### **2.3. Reflections**

This literature review explored three key domains for the construction of Hui ethnic and national identity under Xi Jinping. Firstly, the chapter reviewed scholarship on Hui identity and ethnic group historical background. In this section it is possible to observe that Hui identity is fluid and is shaped by both cultural practices and socio-political classifications, as Gui (2016) and Lipman (2011) state. Gladney (1991) also argues in this direction, revealing that Hui identity has been historically constructed through the interaction with Han society and state institutions, not merely through objective cultural elements.

Still related to Hui's identity, scholars have argued in the direction of a “dual identity”, meaning that Hui are defined both by their Muslimness and by their Chineseness. They navigate through Han-majority society while negotiating both ethnic and national identities, downplaying one or another depending on context (Turnbull, 2016). This dual identity is constantly negotiated in daily life in relation to state power (Gladney, 1991). This is crucial to understanding how state policies attempt to reshape ethnic consciousness and ultimately identity.

Furthermore, literature on the evolution of patriotism that followed after the 1989 Tiananmen protests reveal a key development, or continuity, of the state's ideological project to recalibrate narratives around national identity and Party's authority. Scholars have analyzed the PEC as a nation-wide, state-sanctioned project that aims to consolidate national unity and party legitimacy in educational spaces (Wang, 2012). However, there remains a gap in how the policies under this campaign target minorities, particularly the Hui, whose relationship with state power and social relations is seemingly less conflictual than other ethnic minorities such as the Uyghur. Acting as a governance tool, the way educational policies portray ethnic

minorities through textual and visual elements ultimately shapes Han perception over minorities, as well as the former's self-perception (Golik, 2014).

Similarly, religious policies that target Muslim, or more specifically, Hui communities, define the boundaries of religion in public, and private life to a certain extent, by delimiting what practices are “legal” or “illegal, “harmless” or “extremist”, “patriotic” or “subversive” (NCHRD & HUIF, 2023). The Sinicization of religion, a course of action that has been increasingly present in policies and regulations in the last decade (Cook, 2017), operates in view of shaping religion so as to politically domesticate it in accordance with state narratives (Ji & Xuan. 2024). As such, patriotism is present in religious policies so as to promote ideological uniformity and combat potential national security threats that religious extremism, as loosely defined by the CCP, might produce.

By questioning how state policies during Xi Jinping's leadership construct Hui ethnic and national identity through patriotic discourse, this study aims to contribute to broader debates on the intersection of ethnicity, governance, and nation-building in contemporary China. Additionally, in upcoming chapters patriotic discourse present in state policies will be analyzed not only as a tool for ideological governance that aims to control and suppress identities and narratives, but also as a tool with a constructive purpose. This constructive characteristic can be understood as actively building or shaping a specific vision of national identity and belonging. It both disciplines difference and produces a shared narrative of what it means to be part of the Chinese nation-state.

### **3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This thesis analyzes how recent policies issued under the Xi Jinping leadership have constructed Hui identity through patriotic discourse. To approach this question, the study draws on two theoretical perspectives that are interrelated: identity as discursively and institutionally constructed, and educational and religious policies as ideological apparatuses of the state.

First, we should understand discourse as a form of power that does not merely reflect reality, it participates in shaping it while also being shaped by the social contexts in which it operates (Fairclough, 1992). Discourse present in state policies is a tool of governance that delineates acceptable forms of behavior and beliefs (Foucault, 1977). As such, educational and religious institutions that are shaped by state policies reproduce this discourse, meaning that they are not neutral institutions. Rather, they operate as ideological apparatuses of the state (Althusser, 1971). This demonstrates that institutions reproduce ideology and enact discourse, giving it the power to shape social realities. Within these institutions, authoritative texts act to frame the limits of permissible identity expression by defining what is legitimate, acceptable, or deviant (Foucault, 1977). For instance, school curricula, state-authored slogans, and state-issued religious manuals come into play to delimit how ethnic and religious expression can be expressed or practiced. Thus, these materials go beyond reflecting existing regulations, they are active agents that reproduce the frameworks within which identity is negotiated. As a result, identity is not fixed or intrinsic, it is a product of struggle and ongoing negotiation within discursive and institutional constraints. (Hall, 1996).

Building on this, Brubaker & Cooper (2000) shift the focus from “identity”, which is often treated as a fixed essence, to “identification”, an ongoing process in which social practices, and institutional routines take an active role in constructing identity. Applied to the Hui context, it means that their identity needs to be understood not as static, but as fluid and

continuously redefined by navigating through ethnic, religious, and national constraints imposed by discourse.

Based on this theoretical framework, the next section presents the analytical process through which the primary sources of this thesis are examined so as to draw conclusions on the topic in question.

### **3.1. Analytical Approach**

This thesis applies a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to examine the mechanisms through which ethnic and national identity are constructed in authoritative texts. Drawing from Fairclough's (1992) work, discourse is understood as a form of social practice that not only reflects but actively participates in shaping social structures. CDA reveals how language is used to normalize power relations, delimit legitimate forms of identity expression, and marginalize dissent (Wodak & Meyer, 2012; van Dijk, 1993). This demonstrates why CDA is particularly suited for analyzing ideological governance. The analysis is centered on the state discourse layer, more specifically, state-issued texts that regulate ethnic and religious affairs, which provide insight into how identity boundaries are ideologically produced and enforced through institutionalization.

The analysis is synchronous, and it focuses on a group of four policy documents issued between the years of 2023 and 2024. This period marks a moment in which Sinicization of religion and institutionalization of patriotism in multiple domains are deepened. The four authoritative texts are as follows.

First, on the Patriotic Education Law (2023), a national law adopted at the Sixth Session of the Standing Committee of the 14th National People's Congress on October 24 of 2023,

which deepened the institutionalization of patriotic education across multiple sectors of society, including ethnic and religious domains.

The second text is the Joint Initiative Statement (2024), formally titled “Joint Initiative on Studying, Publicizing, and Implementing the Patriotic Education Law to Inherit and Promote the Spirit of Patriotism”. This document is a policy initiative issued collectively by all the nine official religious organizations in China that oversee Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. It shows how religious communities implement patriotism within their institutional and doctrinal practices.

Following, the Five-Year Plan for Deepening the Sinicization of Islam in China (2023-2027), a strategic policy issued by the China Islamic Association (CIA). It offers a framework to adapt Islamic doctrine and practice and align it with the broader Sinicization project.

Lastly, the fourth document is the Regulations of Religious Affairs of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (2023), a localized administrative regulation issued by the Standing Committee of the People’s Congress of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. This policy draws on the national-level Regulations on Religious Affairs (2017) and adapts it to the local context.

For clarity and consistency, these documents will be referenced throughout the analysis chapter as: Patriotic Education Law, Joint Initiative, Sinicization Plan, and Ningxia Regulations respectively in the order that they were stated above. All documents were sourced from official government and religious association websites in PDF format, then converted into Word documents for analysis. In order to preserve linguistics and rhetorical nuances, the original Mandarin Chinese versions were kept. So as to facilitate the coding, comparison, and categorization processes across all four texts, the analysis was conducted using the Atlas.ti software.

The guiding questions of this analysis are (1) how do state policies frame patriotism?, (2) how is sinicization of Islam framed within patriotic discourse?, and (3) how do discursive strategies construct Hui identity? To address such questions, the study uses a qualitative, evolutionary coding approach, which combines both deductive and inductive methods. The initial coding categories were created drawing from existing research on Sinicization, ethnic policy, and ideological discourse under Xi Jinping leadership. Additional codes emerged along the process of engagement with the documents. Thus, the coding scheme was developed gradually in multiple stages and consistently applied to all four texts.

Furthermore, the coding scheme gave particular focus to discursive strategies such as oppositional constructions, mitigation strategies, interdiscursivity, and repetition of Party slogans. The coding categories were applied primarily at sentence level, while having in mind that ideological positioning and discursive strategies often operate through syntactic structures rather than isolated words.

This research does not concern itself with lived experience and reception of the texts by the Hui communities living in China. It is focused on the intended ideological function of policy texts, revealing how they operate in regulating and ultimately constructing Hui identity aligned with the Party's values. While the focus is on textual analysis, the study acknowledges, but does not profoundly analyze the material and institutional dimensions of policy implementation, such as the restructuring of religious schools, or teacher training programs.

#### **4. Contextual Background**

This chapter provides the historical, ideological, and political background necessary to situate the policy texts which will then be analyzed in the following chapters. It outlines the

primary features of ethnic and religious governance in China, the evolution of securitization and Sinicization of Islam under Xi Jinping, and the central role of patriotism as a political tool.

Starting with China's ethnic and religious affairs, the CCP officially recognizes 56 ethnic groups and upholds the principle of ethnic equality. The freedom of religious belief is also guaranteed in the Constitution. In an attempt to balance this constitutional right and safeguard the CCP's goal of nation-wide ideological cohesion, many religious and ethnic affairs regulations have been enacted to reflect state narratives. Ethnic and religious affairs are managed through a combination of administrative structures and ideological tools. Institutions such as the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, the State Administration for Religious Affairs, and official religious organizations reproduce state ideology through tools such as patriotic education, and mass mobilization. Over time, state concern over national security, religious extremism, and separatist movements have contributed to a shift in policy framing and state discourse.

Under the Xi Jinping leadership, the treatment of Islam in official discourse shifted. Following increasing unrest in Xinjiang and global concerns about Islamic extremism, Chinese authorities began connecting Islam more explicitly with instability and security threats (Gonul & Rogenhofer, 2019). This securitization shift facilitated a reconstruction of religious governance. In this context, the Sinicization of Islam takes form as a reflection of Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" in the field of religious affairs management (Ji & Xuan, 2024). First announced by Xi Jinping as a guideline in 2015, in 2017 the 19th National Congress officially adopted the Sinicization of religion as part of its national project for religion. It states that in

China religion should “adhere to the direction of Sinicization”, and should be “actively guided to adapt to socialist society”<sup>5</sup>.

Islam, as a transnational faith, has become one of the central targets of this policy, however Chinese Muslim ethnic groups have been affected in varying degrees by this ideological realignment (Gui, 2016). Notably, even the Hui who historically have been portrayed as a “model minority” due to their apparent assimilated and loyal identity (Gladney, 1991), have been under tighter control in recent development of religious regulations (Gonul & Rogenhofer, 2019).

Under Xi Jinping, patriotism has become a foundational pillar of ideological governance. Patriotism is increasingly present in legal texts, and educational reforms, particularly in the Patriotic Education Campaign (PEC). Originally, the PEC surfaced as a response from the post-1989 political anxiety around the legitimacy crisis experienced by the CCP (Wang, 2012). Now, with the revised Patriotic Education Law (2023) it is extended beyond school curricula into the workplace, and religious institutions, for instance.

In 2017, in parallel with this recalibration, the State Council revised the Regulations on Religious Affairs. The revised version reinforces the Party’s supervision and regulatory capacity over religious institutions and activities. It reflects a trend of institutionalizing religious governance through policy texts so as to promote themes of national unity and ideological cohesion. While this thesis does not treat it as a primary source, it is important to keep in mind that this foundational law provides context and guides subsequent policies, particularly localized implementation, such as the Regulations of Religious Affairs of Ningxia

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<sup>5</sup> “坚持我国宗教的中国化方向，积极引导宗教与社会主义社会相适应” (Chinese Communist Party, 2017)

Hui Autonomous Region (2023) and the Five-Year Plan for Deepening the Sinicization of Islam in China (2013-2017).

## **5. Analysis: Constructing Hui Identity through Patriotic Discourse in Xi Jinping's China**

This chapter addresses the central research question guiding this thesis: How do recent state policies during Xi Jinping construct Hui ethnic and national identity through patriotic discourse? Building on the theoretical framework and contextual foundations stated in previous chapters, this section will draw on four key state policy texts that collectively reflect the CCP's evolving ideological project. The discourse analysis of these policy texts illuminates how patriotic discourse operates to shape the delineation of ethnic and national identity, with particular focus on the Hui population.

### **5.1. Discursive Construction of Patriotism in State Policy**

This section explores the form of patriotism that is being promoted and analyzes discursive strategies present in state policies that construct this particular vision of patriotism. The Patriotic Education Law (2023) and the Joint Initiative (2024) are the central policy texts in analysis since they are key documents to gain insight into the ideological framing of patriotism under Xi Jinping. These texts, particularly the Joint Initiative, also reveal how the state-regulated religious sphere is mobilized to interpret and implement this vision.

A defining feature of both policies is the fusion of nation, Party, and socialism into a unified object of loyalty. Patriotism is consistently constructed as inseparable from Party-centered loyalty, and with an unwavering alignment with the Party's doctrines and goals. Throughout the two policies, but particularly evident in the Patriotic Education Law, patriotism is anchored in references to the Party's key ideologies, including Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Theory of the Three Represents, the Scientific Outlook on Development, and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. The alignment of patriotism and socialist doctrines is codified through political slogans such as the "Two Establishes" (两个确立, *liangge queli*) and "Two Safeguards" (两个维护, *liangge weihu*) that reinforce the ideological centrality of the Party and the authority of Xi Jinping himself.

Hence, patriotism is not depicted as an emotional attachment to the nation and its culture, it is instead a political obligation that requires acknowledgement of the Party's authority and obedience to Party's rule. This obligation is legally enforced as the policies under scrutiny criminalize unpatriotic behavior and transform patriotism as a civic duty.

This framework is extended within the religious sphere. Religious groups are compelled to affirm the Party's authority and legitimacy as a prerequisite for inclusion in China. The Joint Initiative states "without the Chinese Communist Party, there would be no new China (...), and even less today's favorable circumstances for the healthy transmission of religion in China"<sup>6</sup>. The Joint Initiative emphasizes that state law must always come first, over any religious

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<sup>6</sup> "没有中国共产党就没有新中国, (...) 更没有今天我国各宗教健康传承的良好局面" (Joint Initiative, 2024)

doctrine, declaring that “believers are citizens first”<sup>7</sup> and only then believers. This frames religious identity as subordinate to national identity.

In this way, state policies operate as a boundary-making mechanism by defining permissible expression of religiosity in terms of political conformity, as it delegitimizes any practice or belief that is incompatible with the Party’s values.

In previous chapters it was established that scholarly consensus generally views Sinicization of religion as less concerned with cultural assimilation, and more towards political conformity. Nevertheless, both the Patriotic Education Law and the Joint Initiative repeatedly articulate patriotic identity as also linked to identification with “traditional Chinese culture”. However, such “traditional Chinese culture” representation is quite selective and ideologically inflected. The texts frame it through the lens of party-approved values, such as social harmony and civility, and by highlighting activities such as reciting Chinese classics or celebrating traditional folk holidays.

This strategy that presents cultural elements as inherently aligned with patriotic values softens coercive dimensions of state intervention. Rather than perceiving this strategy as forceful assimilation, the policies construct the image of a harmonious Chinese culture into which ethnic and religious identities are already naturally integrated. The selective reinterpretation of religious doctrines, that is present in direct quotations in the Joint Initiative, for instance by stating that “Islam holds that ‘patriotism is part of faith’”<sup>8</sup> contributes to this image by portraying ethnic and religious identities as ideologically compatible patriotism, and consequently compatible with the state’s vision of national identity. This perspective is present

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<sup>7</sup> “教民首先是公民” (Joint Initiative, 2024)

<sup>8</sup> “伊斯兰教主张爱国是‘信仰的一部分’” (Joint Initiative, 2024)

in both policies and it emphasizes values such as harmony, civility, and unity, which are quite vague and flexible enough to be projected onto diverse religious traditions.

Ultimately, the policies seek to strengthen ethnic and national unity. This objective encompasses the cultivation of national consciousness among Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, as well as among China's religious and ethnic communities. To realize this aim, the CCP disseminates patriotism across various sectors of society. Although the vehicle to promote patriotism is formally labeled as "patriotic education", its scope extends beyond school curricula. The Patriotic Education Law establishes a nation-wide, multi-domain programme that is present in school classrooms, museums, tourist sites, workplaces, the military, and public spaces. This way, patriotic education is not limited to a discrete presence in schools, but it is a continuous theme in the daily lives of all citizens.

Zooming in on linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms, the Patriotic Education Law adopts an institutional voice that encodes legal obligation by using modal verbs such as "shall" and "must". This is complemented by elevated and evaluative language when making reference to "the great banner of socialism", "brilliant future", or "splendid culture", for instance. These strategies both naturalize the Party's authority and infuse the policy with moral and emotional weight.

Discursively, patriotism is not constructed merely through coercive ways or through prohibitions, the power of affective language also plays a key role in setting patriotism as an emotional and moral imperative. For instance, obedience is presented only through coercion, but by framing it as gratitude and duty.

The Joint Initiative fits within the call-to-action genre, and uses inclusive pronouns like "we" and "ours" to symbolize the collective approval of the nine official religious associations to what concerns the implementation of patriotic education in the religious sphere. For

example, the collective and authoritative tone is visible in “We hereby issue the opposing initiative”<sup>9</sup>.

The official religious associations’ signatures at the end of the document act as a performative act of institutional endorsement. Notably, the absence of a concluding paragraph positions the signatories and date as a discursive marker of closure. This symbolizes that the initiative is not open for deliberation, it is finalized, ratified, and immediately actionable in a collective manner.

Summarizing, patriotism is framed as a duty and as identification with the Party, where identification with socialist values are moral - and legal - imperatives. The highest ideal in this nation-wide project is the achievement of a cohesive national identity that unites all ethnicities and territories within the Chinese nation. Concerning how patriotism is being constructed discursively, the policy documents reveal how language and emotions are invoked to create a collective moral imperative rather than just a political one. This is achieved by merging intertextual slogans, inclusive pronouns, evaluative language, and signatories as textual markers.

## **5.2. The Sinicization of Islam as Patriotic Practice**

The following section analyzes how the Sinification of Islam is framed as a form of patriotic practice within Chinese policy discourse. It focuses on two primary texts: The Sinicization Plan (2023-2027) and the Ningxia Regulations (2023). These documents offer insight into how Islam is legitimized through a state-approved patriotic lens. Notably, the

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<sup>9</sup> “我们发出如下倡议” (Joint Initiative, 2024)

Ningxia Regulations is a localized implementation of the core principles outlined in the Regulations on Religious Affairs (2017), a national policy document.

Both the Sinicization Plan and the Ningxia Regulations establish patriotism as the foundational frame through which religion must be interpreted, regulated, and practiced. The Sinicization Plan functions as an ideological template replete with metaphors, slogans, and mnemonics that emotionally elevate national unity and translate patriotic loyalty into religious expectations. The Ningxia Regulations, in contrast, operationalizes these ideals through legally enforceable directives. Stripped of figurative language, this regional document grounds Sinicization in everyday governance.

This is visible in the two definitions of patriotism that these policy texts offer. In the national plan, the Sinicization Plan, patriotism is metaphorized as a “shining banner that unites people of all ethnicities and faiths across the country”<sup>10</sup> that has always guided ethnic groups to “collectively go through the storm”<sup>11</sup> and endure hardships. This metaphor frames patriotism as an heroic collective mission. It is further constructed through the slogan “Five Recognitions” (五个认同, *wuge rentong*), those being identification with the motherland, with the Chinese nation, with Chinese culture, with the Chinese Communist Party, and with socialism with Chinese characteristics. These are obligations that Muslim groups should strengthen. The regional level document, the Ningxia Regulations, presents the same idea in legal language by stating that “religious work shall uphold the leadership of the CCP (...) and adhere to the direction of the Sinicization of religion in China”<sup>12</sup>. Here, patriotism is no longer metaphorically posed, but it is a statutory obligation which non-conformity is subject to

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<sup>10</sup> “爱国主义是团结全国不同民族、不同信仰者的一面光辉旗帜” (Sinicization Plan, Section 3.1.)

<sup>11</sup> “风雨共担” (Sinicization Plan, Section 3.1.)

<sup>12</sup> “宗教工作坚持中国共产党的领导，(…) 坚持我国宗教中国化方向” (Ningxia Regulations, Art.4)

penalties. Thus, where the Plan persuades through patriotic uplift, the Regulations persuade through legalist deterrence.

Furthermore, the Sinicization Plan constructs a forward-looking vision of Islam's patriotic reformulation. The Ningxia Regulations, by contrast, legislate its present-day implementation. This temporal distinction demonstrates a broader logic of ideological control: national policy constructs the ideological alignment as an evolving goal, and local regulations enforce its realization. While both documents employ collective terms typical of policy discourse, such as "citizens", "religious groups", "associations", in this context it functions to present Sinicization as a structural duty. However, the agent in this process of ideological alignment is different in each of these two policies.

The Sinicization Plan presents the Islamic community (伊斯兰教界) as an active agent who willingly and consistently aligns its positioning according to patriotic values. Its tone is motivational and exhortative, present in passages such as in Section 3 that mandates to carry out a series of thematic education activities so as to "unite and guide Islamic circles and Muslim masses to keep deepening the 'Five Recognitions'"<sup>13</sup>. Here, the patriotic values guide the Islamic community, but it is they themselves who are tasked with running this duty within the afore-mentioned activities. In "publish high-quality preaching templates (...) [that] guide Muslim masses to consciously practice the core socialist values"<sup>14</sup>, the act of creating and publishing these texts is entrusted to the community.

In contrast, the Ningxia Regulations construct religious actors primarily as objects of regulation, not ideological participants. The text consistently addresses institutions, not communities, making a critical point in how religious groups are positioned in the discourse.

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<sup>13</sup> "团结引导广大伊斯兰教界人士和穆斯林群众不断增进 '五个认同'" (Sinicization Plan, Section 3.1.)

<sup>14</sup> "出版高质量讲经范本……引导穆斯林群众自觉践行社会主义核心价值观" (Sinicization Plan, Section 3.2.)

For instance, Article 65 mandates that people's governments should "supervise" and "inspect" religious schools and venues regarding their compliance with laws and regulations, which religious entities in question "shall accept". The contrast created by modality lies not merely in function, but in rhetorical framing: where the Sinicization Plan invites participation, the Ningxia Regulations demand compliance.

As for Sinicization, the concept appears throughout both texts as the process by which patriotism is to be cultivated within the religious sphere. As established in the previous section, it is not only a cultural initiative, even if predominantly described as such in policy texts, but a political strategy to align religion with state-sanctioned values. In the Sinicization Plan, Sinicization is linked to the modernization of Islam through "healthy" development that reinterprets classic Islamic texts to prove intrinsic compatibility with Confucian values and socialist ideology (Sinicization Plan, 2023-2027). The Ningxia Regulations require clerics to possess and preach both patriotic religious doctrine and socialist thought (Arts. 27, 44), as for religious venues, they should incorporate elements of Chinese culture (Art. 20). Through measures such as the afore-mentioned, the state aims to reconstruct Islamic identity from within, embedding it into the patriotic discourse.

Across both documents, religion, or particularly Islam, is treated as a faith with patriotic potential, but only if it conforms to state patriotic expectations. The Sinicization Plan praises Islam and its believers in their efforts for improving their political stance and consolidating their identification with the Chinese national, however, it is never depicted as inherently legitimate. Although some of its core values like peace, or harmony, are portrayed as compatible with the Party's values, this recognition as "patriotic" is conditional upon alignment with consistent Sinicization efforts. This discursive corridor highlights that Islam is only

celebrated when reconstituted as patriotic and compatible with socialist values. Religious faith is permissible as long as it overlaps with civic loyalty and keeps its subjectivity to the Law.

The Ningxia Regulations adopt a much more securitized lens than the Sinicization Plan. Although Islam is rarely mentioned in text, the regional context makes it clear that it is the primary target, as the Hui constitute the largest ethnic minority in Ningxia. This erasure strategy is in itself discursive; by framing rules in universal terms, the document legitimizes a broad regulatory framework while selectively enforcing it mostly upon a specific minority. Article 8 introduces a principle of governance through a five part formula: “protect the lawful, ban the illegal, curb extremism, resist infiltration, combat crime”<sup>15</sup>. This framing casts religion - implicitly Islam - as a potential risk that must be monitored and contained within a permissible scope.

Several mechanisms are put in place to recode Islamic practice within patriotic boundaries. At the national level, the Sinicization Plan tasks clergies to “tell patriotic stories” of Chinese Muslims. The Ningxia Regulations reinforces the alignment of Islam with the Chinese patriotic tradition: mosque management committees are required to educate believers in patriotism (Art. 26), imams must pass annual reviews and may not preach anything that opposes Party leadership (Arts. 27, 44). These provisions transform religious authority and spaces of worship into vehicles of national pedagogy as faith is legitimate to be practiced when domesticated by the state.

In sum, the Sinicization of Islam is framed in both documents as a patriotic duty that re-constructs religious expression through state-aligned values. While the Sinicization Plan mobilizes ideological language to position Islamic communities as participants in this collective patriotic mission, the Ningxia Regulations translate this goal into legal mechanisms

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<sup>15</sup> “保护合法、制止非法、遏制极端、抵御渗透、打击犯罪” (Ningxia Regulation, Art.8)

that regulate religious practice. Taken together, they construct a discourse in which Islam is legitimized in the Chinese nation, but only when it conforms to the Party's vision of national unity and ideological conformity.

### **5.3. Constructing Hui Identity: Between Ethnicity, Religion, and Nation**

The sub-chapter 5.1 analyzes the ideological framing of patriotism in today's China, and 5.2 explores how Islam is rearticulated as a patriotic practice. Building on this analysis, this section examines the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and national belonging in policy discourse that operates in the construction of Hui identity. This analysis does not deal solely on how policy texts operate discursively, the focus is the implications of these discursive mechanisms that strategically position Hui identity within authoritative texts. Although the Sinicization Plan or the Ningxia Regulations do not explicitly describe what Hui identity expression should look like, the texts delineate the contours of a state-sanctioned Hui identity. This constructed identity may be culturally distinct, however it also participates in Chinese culture, which is also constructed. It is an identity that is both religiously Islamic, yet ideologically Sinicized. Its ethnic and religious traits are permitted, and even celebrated, as long as they are reframed within the boundaries of the patriotic narratives.

The boundaries for the expression of Hui identity in the form of cultural practices or religious faith, are drawn discursively through contrasts. The celebration of the Islamic community's ability to continuously improve their political stance and to consciously practice socialist values (Sinicization Plan, 2023-2027) draws a line between "patriotic" and "unpatriotic". In parallel, the boundary between "harmonious" and "separatist" is established by applying sanctions to institutions which do not incorporate Chinese-style architecture in

religious venues, or to those which refuse to be an independent organization, free of foreign influence (Ningxia Regulations, 2024). Even though these binaries are not explicitly articulated, the promotion of certain behaviors and sanctioning of others allows for the discursive construction of a state-sanctioned, permissible identity for Muslim communities.

This binary logic is particularly visible in the Ningxia Regulations that outlines the principles of religious governance as “protect the lawful, ban the illegal, curb extremism, resist infiltration, combat crime”. The inclusion of “curbing extremism” in religious management texts is not a neutral legal directive, as it evokes global security narratives while domesticating them to justify ideological conformity. Islamic, and particularly Hui identity, which is implicitly targeted in the Ningxia Regulations on Religious Affairs, is acceptable when visibly non-threatening, and institutionally loyal, while dissent is rendered suspect.

Notably, apart from telling what is or what is not permissible within the boundaries of Hui identity, state policies can also operate through more subtle erasure techniques. For instance, the lack of ethnic naming in the Ningxia Regulations might give an appearance of neutrality and universal applicability, but in practice it permits selective enforcement on Hui communities under the pretense of a universalizing legal directive. Because authoritative texts that manage religious affairs generally target organized religion and religious activities, rather than ethnic identity per se, religiosity becomes a proxy through which ethnic identity is addressed and regulated. The result is a discursive blurring between “ethnic” and “religious”, which when applied to the Hui case, erases its communities’ internal diversity, imposing it into a more manageable framework.

Although Hui identity encompasses a wide range of religiosity, from devout practitioners to secular or culturally Muslim individuals, policy texts construct a homogenized

religious subject whose patriotism is demonstrated through ideological conformity. This process highlights the gap between *lived* identity and *constructed* identity.

Summarizing, policy discourse reveals a strategic fusion of ethnicity, religion, and national belonging under the logic of patriotic alignment. Hui identity is rendered acceptable only when recoded in terms of ideological loyalty and cultural conformity, while religiosity functions as the dominant lens through which ethnicity is interpreted and governed. This process is an example of how ethnic and religious difference is shaped and enacted within the ideological boundaries of the Party.

## **6. Discussion**

The previous analysis chapter has affirmed that recent state policies under Xi Jinping construct Hui ethnic and national identity through patriotic discourse by framing Islam as a conditionally legitimate religion and by regulating Hui identity within narrow boundaries of political loyalty and cultural conformity.

Patriotism as a state narrative is framed primarily as a duty that involves identification with the Party and with socialist values, and political loyalty to the Party's rule. It is acted out with its ultimate goal in mind, the construction of a cohesive national identity that unites the entirety of Chinese people. The Sinicization of religion refers to the process of adapting religious doctrine and practices to the Chinese context, which involves reconstructing them so as to align with the Party's values and socialist ideas. In the context of Islam, Sinicization narratives have a tendency to accentuate extremism discourse so as to justify the close supervision of Islam. Thus, the adaptation of Islam to the mainstream Chinese society is a patriotic duty of all Chinese Muslim groups, which includes the Hui. Through patriotic

discourse, Islam is reconstructed so as to legitimize its practice by aligning to the Party's vision of national unity.

Concerning the Hui identity construction through policy discourse, religion is the major lens through which ethnic identity is understood by statutory bodies. Considering the fact that state-led categorization of ethnic minorities included objective criteria, which the Hui did not possess entirely as a community, religion became the primary mechanism that state policies could target so as to regulate Hui communities. Even though Hui communities present a very high internal diversity to what concerns religious faith and practice, most Hui individuals are either devout or engage with Islam on a cultural level (Turnbull, 2016). This means that authoritative texts can regulate Hui identity and delimit its expression by setting the legitimate boundaries for Islamic practice and preaching. Ultimately, Hui identity is legitimate but primarily as a regulated identity that keeps religious expression visibly loyal, politically docile, and culturally Sinicized.

These findings that intersect ethnicity, religion, and patriotism show the delimitation of Islamic expression so as to reframe Hui identity as a depoliticized Muslim subject whose values are in alignment with the Party's. Religious spaces become a patriotic site to demonstrate national loyalty and belonging. The analysis of the Patriotic Education Law, the Joint Statement, the Sinicization Plan, and the Ningxia Regulations demonstrates that Hui identity is constructed through distinct discursive strategies so as to frame patriotism as both an ideological imperative and a boundary-setting device.

From these findings, it is possible to reach this thesis main argument which argues that recent state policies issued under Xi Jinping's leadership construct Hui ethnic and national identity through a patriotic discourse that operates as both an ideological framework and as a governance tool. Within this discourse, patriotism is a moral and legal duty, defined by loyalty

to the Chinese Communist Party, identification with socialist values, and identification with the broader Chinese nation. The legitimation of Islam, as presented in official policy texts, is made conditional upon adherence to these patriotic expectations. Considering that Hui identity is generally inseparable from Islamic belief and practice, the regulation of Islam in policy texts translates into the regulation of Hui identity. Consequently, while patriotism is expected of all Chinese citizens, Hui individuals are uniquely tasked with demonstrating their loyalty through the Sinicization of Islam, reframing religious adaptation as a form of patriotic compliance. This dual expectation places Hui identity within a discursive framework that sets boundaries along two intersecting dimensions: civic-national loyalty and religious conformity. In doing so, patriotic discourse delimits the acceptable expressions of Hui ethnicity and religion, constructing a version of Hui identity that is politically loyal, culturally assimilated, and ideologically aligned with state priorities.

This reinforces theoretical perspectives that view state discourse as a force that actively shapes social and political realities (Fairclough, 1992). Discourse functions as a tool of governance that produces and regulates acceptable forms of identification and expression (Foucault, 1977). In the Chinese context, policy texts that define patriotism, religion, and ethnicity do not function in isolation, rather, they work through institutions to establish the boundaries between legitimacy and deviance in how Hui identity can be expressed. This process of boundary construction through state discourse is possible through the ideological apparatuses of the state, such as religious institutions, which actively take part in the reproduction of discourse (Althusser, 1971).

Zooming out on the topic, this study illustrates how China's approach to the regulation of ethnic and religious diversity relies on a combination of ideological and disciplinary control. Historically seen as a "model minority", the increasing securitization narratives have shown

that even moderate Hui religious expression is increasingly subject to assimilation policies. Still, ethnic and religious governance regarding the Hui is generally not carried out through explicit restriction and prohibition. Instead, the state uses strategic framing and narrowing of the permissible boundaries of Hui expression in state policies so as to produce a patriotic Hui identity.

While this thesis focus is on official policy discourse, it is also limited by it. It shows how Hui identity is constructed from above, however, it does not address how Hui individuals and communities negotiate these constructed portrayals. Nonetheless, this gap can also point to possible future research that explores how Hui communities themselves respond to the discursive constraints outlined in this thesis. Furthermore, due to the internal diversity present within the Hui population, particularly between urban and rural communities, it would be relevant to study how religious affairs policies affect different communities, devout practitioners and those who mostly identify as Muslim in a cultural sense. Even though non-believer Hui individuals might not feel personally “targeted” for religious restrictions, they are still subjects of the broader cultural assimilation policies that affect their community’s identity markers. In doing so, research in this area would move beyond discourse to investigate the lived and contested nature of identity under the Party’s governance.

## **7. Concluding Remarks**

Throughout the sections of this thesis the central question “How do recent state policies under Xi Jinping construct Hui ethnic and national identity through patriotic discourse?” guided research and analytical focus. By analyzing four major policy documents, those being the Patriotic Education Law (2023), the Joint Initiative on Studying, Publicizing, and Implementing the Patriotic Education Law to Inherit and Promote the Spirit of Patriotism

(2024), the Regulations of Religious affairs of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (2023), and the Five-Year Work Plan for Deepening the Sinicization of Islam in China (2023-2027). These primary sources offered insight into patriotic narratives inserted in multiple domains as a collective national project, the reconstruction of Islam within patriotic narratives and the logic of Sinicization, and the implications this brings to the discursive construction of Hui identity through the regulation of religion.

Taken together, these findings support the thesis that patriotism is framed in recent policies as a moral and legal duty of all Chinese citizens. It involves an emotional loyalty to the nation, but also identification with socialist values and political loyalty to the Party. Having such in mind, patriotism as framed in policies sets the framework through which Sinicization of Islam is carried out. Islamic faith and practice is then conditionally legitimized as long as it is aligned with patriotic values. Within this framework, Hui identity, that is closely tied to Islam, is reconstructed along two axes, national-political loyalty that is expected from them as Chinese citizens, and religious conformity.

The fruit of this research supports theoretical perspectives that understand discourse as an active force in shaping social and political realities, a means of governance and a mechanism for defining the limits of legitimate identity through statutory institutions. In the Chinese context, discourse operates through legal, institutional, and ideological apparatuses, performing the work of delineating the boundaries of acceptable forms of identification. Religious organizations, patriotic education programs, local regulations, and other campaigns do not function independently. They echo national narratives and contribute to the fluid, ongoing process of ideological negotiation that shapes how identity is defined, expressed, or suppressed.

This study contributes to ongoing discussions on ethnic and religious governance in China by bringing attention to the role of patriotic discourse as a structuring element in state policy. Existing literature has focused on repression of minorities and minorities' resistance and negotiation processes. This thesis builds on how identity construction can also occur through more subtle discursive processes, such as through the institutionalization of ideological values as patriotism. Thus, the discursive framing of Hui identity is treated as regulated and negotiated within the state's project of nation-building. Hence, it is not merely an explicit, straightforward case of marginalization or forced assimilation.

However, the thesis is also limited by the focus on top-down discourse when analyzing Hui identity construction, as it is not concerned with how Hui individuals or communities engage with these discursive constructions. Future research could help illuminate how lived identity, despite being shaped by discourse, is actively negotiated in social realities.

In final analysis, this study suggests that governance of ethnic and religious identity in contemporary China is embedded in a political logic that seeks to produce national cohesion and ideological conformity through a fusion of disciplinary, discursive, and persuasive strategies. The regulation of Hui identity demonstrates that state power operates in this area by delimiting legitimate expression and defining the terms in which subjects are included in the national project.

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