Top-Down Nationalism: China’s How-To Guide

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The Yanqi mosque in Xinjiang, China

By: Tyler Whitney

This article illustrates how Chinese officials have tried various means to ensure that religion doesn’t rock the boat too much. It does so through the words of You Quan, a leading government official and member of the Communist Party Central Committee. This is a typical exercise in nationalism. Nationalism can come in two basic forms: bottom-up or top-down. Bottom up nationalism doesn’t require the government’s encouragement. It is when people believe their group identity (customs, history, language, etc.) justify them having their own state, or country. Top-down nationalism, which is the kind exemplified in this article, is when the government intentionally makes use of nationalism and its effects to give people a sense of unity—this both enables and justifies political action. For example, the use of icons from Washington D.C. on all US money is top-down nationalism.

Nationalism uses the idea of a shared identity to justify political action. Lately, China has come into the crosshairs of many media platforms and human rights groups for reports of mass detentions and dystopian-sounding surveillance programs. You Quan alluded to the Party’s efforts to control Muslims in Xinjiang by saying: “The Party’s leadership over religious work must be upheld,” and added, “the infiltration of religious extremism must be guarded against”. One of the main themes of nationalism is oneness or sameness. You Quan also expressed a desire that Chinese Muslims would “love the motherland” and that religious leaders would teach adherents to “abide by the law and contribute to the healthy development of Islam.” This whole process has been referred to as the “sinicization” of Islam. To “sinicize” something means to make something Chinese. It suggests that there is a standard and acceptable definition of what it means to be Chinese, and in this context suggests that Chinese Muslims are not Chinese enough. In other words, the Chinese Communist Party isn’t quite satisfied yet with the current way that Chinese Muslims live their faith or express their cultural identity. The antidote to this situation is nationalism.

Geographical entities come into play here as well. The question of ‘sinicizing’ Xinjiang religion is also a matter of sinicizing Xinjiang itself. The relationship between northwest China and the heavily populated coast is often portrayed as urban vs. rural; purely economic in nature. However, the implication of sinicization is that Xinjiang itself just isn’t ‘Chinese’ enough for Beijing, signaling a rejection of the region’s identity status, or rentong. This commonly occurs when a group of people doesn’t talk the way some think they ought to, or when a region operates in ways that are culturally or politically different than the larger group.