FRAMING A CRISIS: XINHUA’S PORTRAYAL OF THE 2009 URUMQI RIOTS TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the media frames used by the Xinhua News Agency in its coverage of the 2009 Urumqi riots. Contemporary scholarship on riot coverage primarily targets countries in the Western world, while comparatively little scholarly effort addresses riot rhetoric in the developing world. The July 2009 riots drew scholarly attention to China in part because the Chinese government broke precedent in allowing the international media greater reporting freedom in Urumqi. At the same time, the Chinese government provided its own English-language coverage through Xinhua, the state press agency, thus defining an official governmental view of the crisis. Other scholars have conducted cross-cultural comparative studies on Chinese and Western coverage of the event, but have paid less attention to the rhetorical patterns and ideological goals underlying the Xinhua coverage itself. This article uses frame analysis to provide a detailed examination of how Xinhua portrayed the 2009 Urumqi riots to an international audience in the initial aftermath of the event. This study analyzes the body of web-based Xinhua riot coverage over a ten-day period (109 articles), beginning with the initial riot on the night of July 5. Findings reveal that Xinhua relied heavily on both governmental sources and citizen interviews to bolster the authority of its reports, as well covering the event using a variety of regional, national, and international geographic frames. Further analysis shows that specific attributions of blame to Rebiya Kadeer and the World Uyghur Congress were part of a larger ideological strategy to downplay the influence of ethnic separatism in Xinjiang and domestic China.

Keywords: Urumqi riots, Xinjiang riots, Xinhua, frame analysis, source attribution
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Introduction

News coverage inevitably shapes how readers perceive current events, especially when reporting on controversial or unfamiliar topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). The commercialization of the Internet and other technological advances from the last few decades have created opportunities for news agencies to reach global audiences with ease. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the effects of news media on viewers have constituted an enduring focus of academic interest, and online media offers a wealth of reporting available for analysis (Deuze, 2003; Lim, 2006). During and after a riot, news media performs the crucial task of clarifying the facts and presenting readers with a digestible account of the events that transpired. Riots often devolve into chaotic patterns of property destruction and violence, which can make the assignment of blame difficult, if not impossible. This inherent confusion grants the media even greater control over how the public understands them. Media studies approach riot coverage from a variety of angles, analyzing framing devices or rhetorical strategies used in coverage to support the sociopolitical agenda of a news organization and shape public opinion (Goffman, 1974; Scheufele, 1999). Riots often involve a racial element, and, as a result, corresponding news coverage has profound implications for the defensibility of the riot as a legitimate form of social protest against racism (Campbell, Chidester, & Royer, 2004).

While scholarship on riot coverage from the Western world has flourished, research has historically neglected reporting from non-Western countries. One area that remains largely unexplored is the intersection of media framing and the political strategy of authoritarian countries. Because authoritarian governments control the majority of output from official news
outlets, analysis must consider framing on both the level of the individual journalist and in the larger context of the national political agenda. Research on media framing must be extended to include news coverage from authoritarian and developing countries, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Belarus, Russia, and China (the focus of this study), in order to further understanding of how non-Western countries interact with readers through news media. This study is, in part, a response to the inattention of modern communications scholars to the role of the Chinese media in public opinion framing and policy consolidation, and a bridge between the topics of news media and rhetorical analysis in a Chinese context.

This study analyzes national news coverage of the 2009 Urumqi riots, a deadly series of events that devastated citizens in China’s northwest quarter. In early July 2009, hundreds of people gathered in the People’s Square of Urumqi, demonstrating in a violent protest that destroyed hundreds of properties. Over the next few days, tensions erupted multiple times between groups of Uyghur and Han Chinese protesters, ultimately resulting in the deaths of nearly 200 people and the injury of more than 1,700 others. Articles analyzed in this study were drawn from the online English-language archive of Xinhua, the national Chinese press agency. In order to capture the organization’s immediate reaction to the riots, the chosen articles were published during the first ten days following the initial eruption of violence on July 5 and examined using frame analysis. The Urumqi riots attracted international attention for a variety of reasons, not the least of which were the unprecedented freedoms granted by the Chinese government to foreign journalists covering the event. Furthermore, the riots are indivisible from the issue of Uyghur separatism, which concerns the large Uyghur diaspora located throughout the world. Xinhua typically conveys the voice of the Chinese government, and likewise, the rhetorical style and content of its reports align with national interests. The informational sources
and the geographic context given in the coverage reveal aspects of how Xinhua hoped to frame the riots for an international audience. In addition, which actors the Xinhua coverage blames for instigating violence is particularly telling of the organization’s political goals. Given the premium placed on national unity by the central government and Xinjiang’s notorious susceptibility to ethnic separatism, whether or not Xinhua assigns blame to domestic insurgents or deflects blame outside of the country is also reflective of Chinese political aims.
Literature Review

Effective communication strategies are essential to crisis resolution and management, minimizing the spread of damage and panic following a conflict. The government, like any management team, relies on the media to limit damage to a regime’s reputation following a crisis. Determining what fundamental goals and values to reinforce in the public eye is a top priority when deciding how much information to release. Authoritarian governments in particular heavily monitor and influence the media to shape public opinion and build civic support. The use of a single, unified “voice” in post-crisis reporting is a vital component of communication strategy, and provides needed consistency to bolster the authority of the leadership body responsible for crisis response (Lerbinger, 2012).

When the crisis in question is a riot, it becomes difficult to answer some of the most basic journalistic questions in media coverage of the event: what happened and who (or what) caused the riot? How many people were injured or killed? What relief efforts have been deployed to control violence and how should the public respond? The nature of riots is to develop in an organic, unruly way; by definition, riots are chaotic and involve violent crowds of people. These frenzied qualities makes validating conflict data and reporting accurate, timely information extremely difficult (Danzger, 1975). Research into media coverage of riots has centered around three methodological approaches: case studies, data validation/empirical analysis studies, and comparative reporting studies. Among these, the most scholarly attention has focused on examining rhetoric used in race-related riots.
**Case studies.** Often a specific riot attracts scholarly interest because of ambiguities in its causation or coverage; in these cases, scholarship examines potential causes and events of escalation, as well as how the media frames riots for the public. Race riots are an especially popular topic, and the racial dimension has been explored in a variety of riots and crises. Contemporary scholars have extensively researched the 2005 Cronulla riots (Poynting, 2006; Kabir, 2007) and 1992 Los Angeles riots (Twomey, 2001; Monroy, Myers, & Meyers, 2004; Herman, 2004), because of their size, large number of casualties, and reflection of deep ethnic/racial discontent within their respective communities.

**Data Validation/empirical studies.** The chaotic development of riots often obstructs the media’s ability to report accurate, timely data. Early research into data validation for riots and crises addresses how to recognize empirical patterns in riots (Stark, Raine, Burbeck, & Davison, 1974) and strategies for data validation during a riot (Danzger, 1975). Current studies explore the use of new media, particularly crowd-based social media platforms, in riot prediction and mediation (Greer & McLaughlin, 2010). Because causal information and the numbers of casualties may initially conflict, early warning signs of social unrest may remain unrecognized until a crisis forces the acknowledgement of uncomfortable social realities (Chen, 2012). This is particularly true in countries undergoing governmental or economic transition, like modern-day China, where maintaining the legitimacy of a shifting regime is especially difficult.

**Comparative studies.** Scholars utilize comparative analysis to determine what news items are valuable to key stakeholders during a crisis, and to reveal differing value systems or priorities for news agencies. Such studies seek to expose the difference in news volume or message strategies used by various news agencies, and show what themes, scale, and actors they emphasize. While some comparative scholarship addresses reporting on a single event from
multiple news vendors, others examine analogous crises in different geographic regions in order to produce fruitful cross-cultural interpretations.

When applied specifically to a riot, comparative studies may analyze strategies used by different news organizations to convey information about the causes or effects of the riot in local, national, or international communities. This type of scholarship sometimes compares the media coverage of a riot from organizations in authoritarian and non-authoritarian governments, and ascribes political or cultural motivations to explain differences in reporting techniques (Almeida & Lichbach, 2003; Snow, Vliengenthart, & Brown, 2007; Zeng, Zhou, & Li, 2015).

**Racial themes.** Racism continues to be one of the most pervasive social issues in the Western world, with roots in the historical use of exploitative institutional systems like slavery or colonialism that capitalize on racial division. Scholars have extensively addressed the role of the media in the formation of racial and political attitudes in Great Britain (Hartmann & Husband, 1974), continental Europe (van Dijk, 1989), and the United States (Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999; Dixon & Linz, 2000), determining that the media has an extremely influential role in shaping public opinion about race on a national scale. These studies have focused primarily on the race relations between white and non-white populations in Great Britain, continental Europe, and the United States, demonstrating how the print or television media contributes to the promotion of racism in the public.

Given the media’s ability to sway public opinion on race and current events, it is unsurprising that significant scholarly effort has focused on examining the intersection of media, race, and riot behavior. In their analysis of print media coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles and 2001 Cincinnati riots, for instance, Campbell et al. (2004) found that newspapers delegitimized riots as a form of social protest, depicting rioting as a sort of primal demonstration rather than “a
macro response to the systemic deprivation of rights” (p. 158). By reinforcing the role that race played in these riots, they allege the mainstream media reinforced troubling associations between rioting and race, and as a result perpetuated the view of the United States as a racially divided nation. The relationship between race, riots, and the media has been widely studied, particularly with reference to differing media portrayals of racial subgroups (van Djik, 1989; Abbas, 2001; Saeed, 2007; Messer & Bell, 2008; Simmons and Lecouteur, 2008). In a comparative study on the reporting for two Australian riots, for example, Simmons and Lecouteur (2008) analyzed racism in the Australian media, which presented the possibility of positive “change” differently for indigenous and non-indigenous communities. While problems in the non-indigenous community were presented as solvable, issues in the indigenous groups were unchangeable; the media again delegitimized the riot as an effective catalyst to social change, this time specifically for the indigenous community.

In general, current scholarship on riot coverage in the mainstream media addresses events in economically developed countries of the cultural west: the United States, Great Britain, continental Europe, and Australia. One drawback of western-centric scholarship is that it largely operates under the assumption of a free or semi-free press, which is not applicable in many developing countries. While studying news media from developing and authoritarian countries, scholars must pay greater attention to the role of government in mediating the news because it plays a markedly different role from that of a government in democratic, Western nations. Where media frames in a free-press country might reflect the bias of that particular author or organization (Hackett, 2009), and not necessarily echo the national agenda, in an authoritarian nation, the government often heavily influences the press. Less attention has been paid to nations in the developing world, perhaps because of the assumption that violence and social disruption
necessarily follows economic or governmental transition. Of the general communications studies that reach outside of this culturally western bubble, some analyses contextualize news coverage from less developed countries, like China, by comparing it to coverage from the western world and especially the U.S. (Yang, 2003; Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 2011; Zeng et al., 2015).

Studying riot behaviors in developing countries is a crucial step in understanding not just the political and military methods used by those nations to deal with public discontent, but also in predicting future social conflict in the developing world. Though classified as a “developing” country, China hosts the world’s largest population and second-largest economy, which is thoroughly entwined with the global economic system. China’s rapid rise to power in the international economy has attracted substantial scholarly attention, and the continuing development of its economy remains intimately tied to the continued political legitimacy of the Communist Party of China. As China takes a more active stance in the global political economy, it is vital that scholars address changing social and political trends in the country. It is widely understood that the Chinese government maintains authoritarian control of the media, but in recent years has taken steps towards greater transparency. This study provides an avenue to examine the rhetorical strategies of Chinese media aimed at an international audience, revealing how the Chinese government hopes to depict its domestic politics to the world.

The July 2009 riots in Urumqi were a singular crisis representing a shift in Chinese policy towards international media. The riots developed at a shocking pace, with hundreds of fatalities and ambiguous racial undertones, immediately garnering attention from a Western audience already familiar with the struggle of the Uyghurs from nonprofit organizations stationed overseas (e.g. the World Uyghur Congress). In a way, the Chinese invitation to foreign media arose naturally from existing foreign interest in the 2009 riots; the crisis itself bears close
connection to those sociopolitical issues of race, media, and riot framing that are of interest to scholars today. The event engaged the global community in multiple ways, not the least of which was the unprecedented degree of freedom granted by the Chinese government for foreign journalists to visit riot-stricken areas and interview citizens about the event. During the regional internet and media blackout following the riot, the local government also arranged a special communications center to accommodate foreign media teams, with these efforts reflecting a desire for greater political openness.

At the same time, however, the Chinese media lashed out at the international community. Reports first accused unnamed “foreign separatists” for inciting the riots from bases abroad, and later honed in on expatriate Uyghur activists living in the United States and Germany as the true culprits. Foreign coverage of the riots that negatively portrayed the government or race relations in China immediately incited hostile response articles from the Chinese media. Amidst an array of competing voices, the Xinhua reports embody the Chinese government’s effort to gain discursive authority on the riots, and establish a report of the damages and causes of the riots officially authenticated by the state. Where the internet blackout in Xinjiang represents a method of controlling the domestic response to the crisis, the English-language Xinhua coverage frames the event for a global audience. What those reports emphasize or deemphasize has profound implications for how the Chinese media and state wants to shape the nation’s reputation on an international level.

Previous scholarship on the July 2009 riots has included case studies examining the political implications of the event, Chinese ethnic policy in Xinjiang, and governmental handling of the riots (Wei & Geng, 2009; Li, 2009; Millward, 2009). Of the communications studies on the 2009 riots, one has adopted a cross-cultural approach comparing Western and Chinese
coverage of the event (Zeng et al., 2015). The remaining media study by Chen (2012) instead focuses on news conferences that followed the riots and what they reveal about the Chinese ideological agenda. Both Chen (2012) and Zeng et al. (2015) have isolated and analyzed Chinese coverage on the riot in relation to the Chinese government, yet show uncertainty in their analysis of the ideology and framing devices present in the reporting.

In explorations of a riot’s background and context, international news organizations reveal different social priorities and goals. Comparative media studies of Western (often U.S. and British) and Chinese coverage seek to find differences in reporting on events with a sensitive political dimension. The 2009 Urumqi riot is a prime example of such an event, and Zeng et al. (2015) have examined how different news outlets frame the events differently in relation to their reader demographics. Their study provides a thorough analysis of the 2009 riots from a comparative perspective by observing media frames of source attribution, theme, “space” (the who/what/when/where/why) and time used by Reuters, the Associated Press, and Xinhua in their coverage of the riots. A large sample of over 700 articles spanning the two months following the riots offers a wealth of data to track changing patterns in reporting from these three international organizations. This study offers a sound methodology and precedent for the use of frame analysis to study Chinese news media, and its top-down approach establishes stable frame categories such as “theme,” “time and space,” and “source attribution” useful for future research.

Zeng et al., however, focus on the dynamism of different aspects in these media reports, rather than how reporting aligned (or misaligned) with the political or social goals of each organization. In addition, it is unclear methodologically whether the authors read the original Chinese-language, translated Chinese-to-English, or original English-language Xinhua articles. Zeng et al. do not address the fact that English authorship implies an international audience for
this coverage, or address how an international audience alters the content of reporting. Finally, the study uses word count instead of article count to measure volume of attention given to the riots by each organization. This strategy discounts the overall volume of articles during the timeframe; if judged according to total quantity of articles, then Xinhua would clearly lead the other two organizations in amount of pieces published during the nine weeks of the study (Zeng et al., 2015). Despite failing to clarify the target audience of Xinhua coverage (and the limitations posed by using word count as a measure of attention), Zeng et al. basically provide a valid methodological framework to track basic news frames used in riot coverage.

Chen (2012) takes a more focused approach to Chinese media rhetoric and its ideological implications by studying news conferences following the July 2009 riots. Chen applies a qualitative, ground-up approach to analyze the content of news conferences put forth by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Council Information Office, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) News and Public Information Office after the July 2009 riots. Chen also conducted in-depth interviews to supplement the findings, concluding that the Chinese government’s willingness to interact directly with the media through news conferences indicated the desire to improve international publicity through more open communications. His findings appear consistent with greater freedoms granted to foreign journalists in Xinjiang by the Chinese government during the crisis.

Chen’s study faces a few limitations in scope and audience when considering the relationship between Chinese news conferences and an international audience. In exclusively analyzing news conferences, Chen fails to mention the Chinese reaction to unfavorable newspaper coverage on the riots from foreign media outlets, which newspaper outlets like Xinhua and People’s Daily expressed in their reporting. He also focuses on news conferences for
a domestic audience, which had no foreign language transcripts or translations available online. Though he claims that the news conferences show evidence of the Chinese government seeking greater international approval by using “Western crisis communication concepts / strategies / tactics,” the material analyzed seems targeted at a domestic audience because of the lack of available foreign-language translations (p. 478). Chen emphasizes how the government held news conferences as a major media response to the riots, and used them as platform to promote its political positions and policies to a domestic audience.

In their media studies on the 2009 Urumqi riots, Chen (2012) and Zeng et al. (2015) share interest in three issues related to rhetorical framing in riot coverage. First, both studies examined the source attribution present in either the news conferences or the Xinhua reporting on the riots, and largely agreed that government officials were a major source for state coverage. Chen also found that expert scholars bolstered governmental authority, while in contrast Zeng et al. found that citizen interviews were a more frequently cited source in the reporting. Second, in terms of the geographic frame (i.e. the “time and space”) used in depiction of the riots, findings from the two studies contradicted each other. Zeng et al. claim that Xinhua defined the July 5 riots on a strictly regional scale for most of the timeframe, but do not take into account the related Shaoguan factory incident that precipitated the riots and occurred in Guangdong province. Chen not only describes the event in reference to the factory incident, he also analyzes how news conferences assigned blame to “foreign separatists” for the riots, clearly placing the crisis in a global, not regional, context. Finally, both studies placed the greatest emphasis on exploring the ideological context given to the riots by media coverage of the event. Zeng et al. (2015) reported that riot coverage in the initial stage was not heavily influenced by ideological forces; presumably because of the “complexity” of the riots, only minimal causation and responsibility
attribution was attempted during the first “stage” (first three weeks) of the riots (p. 463). Chen, on the other hand, claimed that coverage in official press conferences focused on presenting a united ideological front and assigning blame to the World Uyghur Congress. In fact, Chen asserts that the Chinese government excessively reinforced the national ideological agenda, and that its playing of “the blame game” was intended as a distraction from addressing political and ethnic tensions in Xinjiang (p. 479). These results evidence inconsistency in the state coverage of the riots, but whether or not the source of this inconsistency stems from the different media examined by these two studies (news conferences and newspaper coverage) remains unclear. Further research is necessary to determine what ideological context, if any, the Chinese government offered in its initial Xinhua reporting, and if it was consistent with that offered in state-run news conferences.

Examining riots and riot coverage in China is a critical step in understanding how China handles domestic sociopolitical conflict. Foreign-language riot coverage reveals rhetorical strategies used by the Chinese government to secure its correspondence power in international coverage of local and translocal issues. This study hopes to contribute a deeper examination of how the Chinese government portrayed the 2009 Urumqi riots in their immediate aftermath, based on rhetoric used in Xinhua’s initial coverage of the events. An in-depth examination of the frames used in Xinhua coverage and their implications for Chinese political economy has not yet been conducted. Through a detailed content analysis of the Xinhua reporting, I hope to reveal what the rhetorical patterns and values underlie the information conveyed in the selected articles. Specifically, the following three issues remain unresolved in scholarship about Chinese state coverage of the Urumqi riots.
1. What source attribution was present in the Xinhua coverage of the Urumqi riots?

2. How were the Urumqi riots framed geographically by Xinhua?

3. What, if any, larger ideological or social context did Xinhua associate with the riots during the initial reporting period?

These questions will explore important aspects of the rhetoric used by the Chinese state media, investigating the sources of evidence, local-global connections, and ideological context presented by Xinhua in its crisis coverage. As a result, the findings from this study should reveal the political economy of the Chinese media and the nature of interactions between the Chinese media and foreign news agencies.
Methodology

Historical Context

With an estimated population of 10 million people, the Uyghur ethnic group is China’s most populous Muslim minority. Geographic concentration in the isolated Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has allowed the Uyghurs to preserve many of their distinct cultural traditions. The XUAR covers one-sixth of China’s total landmass (approximately 501,933 square miles), and is the cushion between mainland China and its eight Central Asian neighbors. Local separatists have called for Xinjiang’s political autonomy since China first annexed the region in the Qing dynasty and the region has twice seceded to form the Eastern Turkestan Republic (in 1931 and 1944) with Soviet military backing (Chung, 2002).

Chinese goals of building diplomatic and developmental relationships with resource-rich Central Asian neighbors rely on the stability of Xinjiang. Xinjiang’s Tarim Basin contains massive oil and natural gas reserves, and immense Chinese investment in the Silk Road Economic Belt involves building a network of gas, oil, and transportation routes connecting the region to Central Asia (Ooi & Trinkle, 2015). While Xinjiang’s economy has benefited enormously from government investment, the resultant influx of Han migrants has radically changed the ethnic makeup of the region. Over the last sixty years, the Han population has grown from 6.7% to over 40% of Xinjiang’s total population (Bhattacharji, 2012). Combined with demographic changes is the widespread belief that Han migrants benefit from discriminatory hiring practices (Wayne, 2008). Restrictive social policies discourage public religiosity in
Xinjiang, and use cash, housing, and educative incentives to promote ethnic blending; these factors contribute to social tension in the region (Denyer, 2014).

Separatist protests for the greater autonomy in China’s border regions jeopardize the territorial unity and international reputation of China. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the Chinese government reframed its battle against Uyghur separatism as part of a global crusade against terrorism. The government has ascribed terrorist acts committed by Chinese Muslims or northwestern minorities to Uyghur separatist groups, and publicly linked Uyghur separatism to global terror organizations like Al-Qaeda and IS. Currently, the most prominent Uyghur diaspora organization is the World Uyghur Congress (WUC). The group claims its objectives are the use of “peaceful, nonviolent and democratic means” to protect and promote the rights of Uyghurs worldwide (Gunaratna et al., 2010, p. 84). While the WUC is a prominent organization, the Uyghur liberation movement remains largely decentralized. As a result, the Chinese government has taken a variety of bottom-up nonmilitary approaches to combat separatism, fundamentalism, and dissent in Xinjiang. Establishing discursive authority through state media, like Xinhua, represents one influential channel to shape public opinion on the three evil forces” of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.

The present study examines Xinhua news framing of the July 2009 Urumqi riots, focusing on the sources of information, geographic setting, and attribution of blame in riot reporting immediately following the event. The following review summarizes related work in frame analysis and blame attribution studies, which have influenced the research methods chosen for this study.
Studying News Media Through Frame Analysis

In modern mass communication theory, frame analysis is a popular methodological approach to news media analysis. Framing is an agenda-setting tool that exists at the intersection of the author, the audience, and the news media. Readers only understand current events and topics of news media through the screen of authorial intention, and the “frames” used to portray people and events. Current researchers use frame analysis of news media for “the search for stylistic and narrative features,” as well as “thematic and ideological ones” (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, p. 105).

Although the concept of news “framing” has existed since the 1950s, only in the 1990s did the term become a buzzword in mass communication research (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). Erving Goffman popularized his theory of frame analysis in media in 1974, claiming that people interpret the world and society via different conceptual frames, both “natural” (free from human influence) and “social” (dependent on human influence). Vliegenthart and van Zoonen (2011) list the following “sociological axioms” in early frame analysis:

- That frames are multiple and can be contradictory or oppositional;
- That frames are part of a struggle for meaning between different actors that have unequal material and symbolic resources;
- That news frames are the result of situated social and routinized processes in which the agency of the individual journalists is relative;
- That frames used by audiences are the result of socially situated articulations between particular issues, individual and collective differences, experiential knowledge, popular wisdom and media discourse (p. 105).
Key points in this summary emphasize the dependence of readers on “resource”-rich media for meaning and information, as well as the construction of frames based on subjective social conditions (for example, based on life in individual or collective cultures). The rhetoric of news media exists as a series of overlapping and intersecting frames that shape the perspectives and opinions of readers. Frame analysis enables scholars to examine how the news media can be intentionally manipulated to affect readers and allow scholars to hypothesize the reasons underlying the presence of certain frames.

Matthes and Kohring (2008) discuss five methods used for frame analysis: linguistic, hermeneutic, manual holistic, computer-assisted, and deductive. Each of these methods poses known risks for the quality of data collection. The hermeneutic method arguably represents the most popular, and most opaque, method of frame analysis. In this approach, researchers perform qualitative analysis on small samples of media to identify and link “up frames with broader cultural elements” (p. 259). A similar quantitative alternative is the manual holistic method, which first involves the detailed examination of a small sample of articles to determine frames present, and then the subsequent quantitative coding of the larger sample. Both of these methods are largely top-down processes, where the coder begins the study with an expectation of what frames will be present in the text. The main issue with both is the opacity of the process of extracting frames from the literature. Matthes and Kohring claim these studies “run the risk of extracting researcher frames, not media frames” (p. 260).

Other types of frame analysis strive for greater objectivity. Linguistic frame analysis examines a smaller sample—usually a paragraph, not an article—in extreme detail, extracting frames from the placement of words (or certain parts of speech) in sentence or phrase. Though thorough, the “inordinate complexity” of this method makes justifying the actual frames
identified very difficult (p. 260). Computer-assisted frame analysis is highly objective and faster than manual coding, yet Matthes and Kohring emphasize the difficulty in relying on technologically based methods because of the inability of computer programs to adapt to the subtleties of human communication.

Unlike the previous four methods, the final is a deductive (rather than inductive) method of frame analysis. In the deductive method, scholars approach media with predefined frames. The downside of a deductive method, however, is that frames must be known and relevant beforehand, and with such inflexibility, it is easy to skip or accidentally omit a new frame found in the data. One common use of frame analysis on news media is to perform a deductive study that identifies common news frames used by the media surrounding a certain topic. For instance, Trumbo (1996) applies this concept to climate change reporting in the United States, and Xie (2015) takes the topic a step further by comparing the different frames used in climate change news articles from China and the United States. Medical topics represent another popular subject for news frame analysis, as in Luther’s (2005) comparison of frames in Western and Eastern news surrounding SARS reporting in China and the United States.

To prevent the omission of emergent frames and reduce the effect of researcher bias, this study combined the hermeneutic, manual holistic, and deductive methods. Matthes and Kohring (2008) define the “hermeneutic,” “manual holistic,” and “deductive” methods similarly, writing that they are interpretive, bottom-up processes where frames adapt to contain emergent information during the coding process. From these methods have emerged several generic frames now popular in mass communication research, such as conflict frames, human-interest frames, economic frames, and moral frames. This study will use a blended hermeneutic/manual holistic/deductive method to identify how Xinhua framed the source attribution, geographic
environment, and ideological context of the 2009 Urumqi riots. This method emphasizes the influence of contemporary culture in frame analysis, while also acknowledging the need for a stricter framework found in the deductive method and the objectivity of quantitative analysis in the manual holistic method. To maximize transparency, three initial frame categories were posited: (1) source attribution, (2) geography, (3) blame attribution, and (4) ideological connections. As analysis progressed, the flexibility of the research design allowed the coder to add new frames/categories and to re-code previous media, resulting in a more thorough analysis.

**Present Study**

**Materials**

This study analyzed national Chinese media coverage of the July 2009 riots in Urumqi, Xinjiang. In order to limit the study to reporting during and immediately following the riots, a timeframe from July 5, 2009 to July 14, 2009 was chosen. Only articles and reports from this 10-day span contributed to the sample. This timeframe was selected in order to capture the immediate reactions of Chinese news outlets to the Urumqi riots, rather than the national reaction to the legal sentencing and conviction of criminals found responsible for the July riots (which occurred later), or to other riots occurring in August 2009. Complete authorial information was unavailable for the majority of articles, although all media analyzed included at least the surname of an editor. The body of 109 articles was collected from the Xinhua online English-language archive, using keyword searches of “Xinjiang,” “Urumqi,” and “riot” to identify relevant articles from the database. Coverage peaked during the middle of the reporting period and increased again at the end of the timeframe (see fig. 1).
The unit of analysis chosen was the individual news article, including both “hard” news stories (factual and timely reporting of current events) and editorials (opinion pieces). These different categories were included in order to analyze the rhetorical framing devices in articles both intended to be factual and those more overtly intended to persuade readers. This study chose articles from the major news outlet Xinhua because of the newspaper’s strong ties to the Chinese government. Once known as the Red China News Agency, Xinhua (新华通讯社) is China’s official national news agency, and has been a central media voice for official governmental policy and views since its founding in 1931 (Yu, 2009). While researching news coverage of the 2009 riots, it was discovered that over eighty percent of relevant articles from another major news agency, People’s Daily (人民日报), were recapitulations of Xinhua articles, often using similar if not the same article titles on a one-to-one basis.
Coding

A codebook for manual data analysis was developed based on a review of various contemporary approaches to frame analysis (Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011) and examples of blame attribution in global news media (Holton et al., 2012). Matthes and Kohring (2008) note the presence of several frames at work in a single news item, and claim “frames can be understood as strategic views on issues put forth by actors”; in this study, the primary “actor” is the Communist Party of China (CPC). Vliegenthart and van Zoonen (2011) write:

While evidence from frame and framing research of the key relevance of the political, social, and economic power of news sources for building the news agenda is significant … the inevitable question of whether and how this power translates into a news frame that is favourable to the interests of the powers-that-be, has been less prominently posed (p. 108).

The CPC is both “actor” and “powers-that-be” in this instance. The present study focuses on how the Chinese government, as a primary influence on the creation of frames used in the Xinhua coverage, employs strategic news frames to shape public opinion in its favor. Given this goal of understanding how the Chinese media aligns with the party line to support governmental policy, this study employed a hybrid inductive/deductive approach to frame analysis. First, the initial four frames (source attribution, geography, blame attribution, and ideological connections) guided the coding of 30 randomly selected articles from the sample. The researcher added new frames to the codebook as they appeared in the sample, and used the resultant template to recode all 109 articles.
The following basic frame categories emerged: (1) source attribution, (2) source method, (3) country/region (geography), (4) blame attribution, and (5) ideological connections. Within these general categories, coding involved a process of incrementally adding new frames as they appeared, and coding each element with a (0) or a (1) for its absence or presence in an article. The following variables emerged as the foundation of analysis.

**Source Attribution.** The chief sources cited in each article were coded to determine which actors Xinhua and the government deemed credible. The coder noted four different possible sources of information or content within each article: (1) Chinese government officials, (2) civilians (from interviews), (3) Chinese news media (other than Xinhua), (4) foreign news media (from any country outside of China), and (5) foreign government. Again, any mention of these agents as contributors designated them as sources, whether primary or peripheral. Source method was coded to determine whether the cited sources provided (1) “objective” data or (2) opinions for each of the articles.

**Geography.** In order to determine what geographic frames were present in the selected media, the coder noted if articles portrayed the riots in a regional, national, or international context. Articles were coded for geography according to whether they focused exclusively on (1) Xinjiang, on (2) Xinjiang within a larger domestic context, or on (3) Xinjiang in both a domestic and international environment.

**Ideological/Social Context.** To determine if the articles presented the riots in a particular ideological or social context, a combination of variables was examined: blame attribution and ideological connections.

First, blame attribution was coded by identifying the actor(s) assigned blame for instigating or continuing the riots. These actors included: (1) the Chinese national government,
(2) the regional government of Xinjiang, (3) general rioters, with no ethnic or social distinction made, (4) people from the Uyghur ethnic group, (5) The World Uyghur Congress or its president, Rebiya Kadeer, (6) foreign separatists (e.g. expatriates now living outside of China), and (7) Han Chinese people. Given that multiple actors were often mentioned in conjunction with one another, any mention of the above groups as a responsible party in the riots warranted note. Blame attribution indicates Xinhua writers’ intentional linkage of certain people or groups with the riots, and contributes to the overall social context presented.

Next, the variable “ideological connections” determined if the media connected the riots to other sociopolitical movements or presented the event in isolation. The three possible connections considered were the “three evil forces”: (1) ethnic separatism (Uyghur or otherwise), (2) extremism (Islamic), and (3) terrorism (domestic or global). Because of the ambiguity of identifying these concepts, only instances where the words “separatism,” “extremism,” or “terrorism” (or variants) were explicitly used in the article merited coding. These connections represent another type of instigating factor for the riots, but on a purely ideological level.

Aristotelian persuasive concepts of ethos, pathos, and logos supplemented frame analysis of the selected Xinhua coverage. Once the initial frame analysis was completed, findings were examined for evidence of these rhetorical devices at work. Aristotle defines these “modes,” as the three methods of effecting persuasion in rhetoric, and they depend on the speaker’s (or, for this study, author’s) character, emotional intelligence, and ability to wield logic as dialectic tools. “Ethos” refers to the speaker’s credibility, and in a written text depends on the various measures taken by the author to enhance his or her own authority and gain the trust of the audience. “Pathos” appeals to the emotions of the audience, with the goal of eliciting a specific emotional response from the viewers that will make them more receptive to persuasion. “Logos” involves
the use of logical appeals that draw on factual evidence or rational argumentation to convince the readers of a certain point (Aristotle & Roberts, 2004). Each of these three persuasive concepts can be applied to written texts, like the Xinhua articles analyzed in this study, and offers unique insight into the underlying aims of different rhetorical frames.

A full copy of the codebook used for this analysis is included in Appendix A, and the list of articles coded in this study is available in Appendix B.
Findings

Source Attribution

Xinhua employed a variety of sources in its initial reporting on the 2009 Urumqi riots. Chinese government officials and civilians were the most frequently cited sources, followed by other Chinese news agencies (excluding Xinhua), the foreign news media, and foreign governments or organizations (respectively). Over the ten-day timeframe, source attribution to the Chinese government gradually decreased and attribution to Chinese media sources, foreign media sources, and foreign governments increased towards the end of the reporting period (see fig. 2).

Table 1: Source Attribution in the Xinhua Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese government</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign government</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian(s)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese news media</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign news media</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fittingly, given Xinhua’s relationship with the central government of China, the majority of articles used government officials as the primary sources of factual data on the riots, including contacts at all levels of the government from the regional Police Chief of Xinjiang to President Hu Jintao (see table 1). Factual data on the riots include information such as the number of casualties, locations of traffic blockades, the extent of police involvement, and direct assignment of blame to Rebiya Kadeer and the World Uyghur Congress. Using governmental sources to support Xinhua’s hard news stories enhances the agency’s reporting ethos and logos by bolstering the organization’s credibility with “objective” data.

Civilian interviews were a significant source of information in almost half of the coded articles (see table 1). Civilian interviews function in a number of different ways in the selected articles, and nearly always appear in combination with “hard” data either preceding or following
the body of the article, adding credibility to personal narratives. Interviews with witnesses or victims of the riots provided a space for a pathos-filled, emotional appeal for national unity. Firsthand accounts of the riots add pathos to the text, and by sharing the horror and fear felt by witnesses and these interviews evoke sympathy from the readers. One interviewee commented on the riots, saying, “We didn't know how precious peace, unity and social stability were, before the riot changed our life …When it is over, I hope people could treasure more of what they had, and live in harmony” (“Can it ever be the same,” 2009). For skeptical readers, these stories are a secondary justification of police involvement (against accusations of police brutality by some Western media). Civilian sources also act as an indirect channel to discuss the role of ethnic prejudice and targeting in the riots, without outright stating that ethnic tension caused them.

Other interviewees, both local citizens and foreign nationals, supported governmental ethnic policy in Xinjiang. A Canadian professor at Xinjiang University apparently “had observed no tension between different ethnic groups on his campus before Sunday's riot” and claimed that “both Uygurs and Hans share the equal right to live and develop, and he was told to take good care of the ethnic minority groups.” Another Xinjiang University professor, originally from the Philippines, “said there was really no evident tension between Uygurs and Hans on the campus. She believed the riot was organized” (“Urumqi demonstration,” 2009). Because these interviews were conducted with foreign nationals who ostensibly are fairly removed from local politics, their accounts of ethnic harmony in Urumqi have greater authenticity than a direct quote from, for example, a Xinhua journalist.

Relatively few articles used Chinese news media (outside of Xinhua) as informational sources (see table 1). These articles included interviews or opinion pieces written by Chinese journalists from different publications, like People’s Daily or Beijing Daily. Some of these
commentaries attacked Rebiya Kadeer or Western coverage of the riots, and often used more emotionally charged language. By mediating the inflammatory comments through association with other news agencies, Xinhua reduces any potential negative impact to its credibility. If anything, Xinhua strengthens its ethos in this coverage by highlighting the opinions of known Chinese journalists, some of whom work for major news networks.

Foreign news media rarely acted as a source for riot coverage (see table 1). Three articles reported on the presence of foreign media in Urumqi and included interviews with foreign journalists about their experience in the city. This sourcing rationalizes government intervention in Urumqi; although the internet blackout in Xinjiang could be interpreted as a measure opposed to informational transparency, the special permissions given to foreign journalists in the city counters that perception, evidencing a newfound state openness to the media.

Other articles refuting claims made by (allegedly) biased foreign coverage of the riots used foreign journalism as a source. These critical articles contest reports by the London Evening Standard, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, and Al Jazeera, which portrayed the riots as justifiable protests against “ethnic discrimination” and ran pieces by or sympathetic to Rebiya Kadeer. Many such articles are summaries of commentary pieces from non-Xinhua, Chinese journalists, deflecting the perception that Xinhua itself supports criticism of those media outlets. These articles feature a high incidence of personal narrative and emotional responses to the foreign coverage, and their authors are supported by associations with other major Chinese news agencies (e.g. People’s Daily).

In these response articles, Xinhua seldom featured direct quotes from those major foreign publications, forcing readers to either search for the source texts or assume the Xinhua summaries were accurate. Instead, these refutation articles include extended quotes from (non-...
Chinese journalists. This frequent use of quotations strengthened the argument against foreign coverage with emotional appeals for the Western media to adhere to international reporting standards, stay out of China’s internal affairs, and stop supporting Rebiya Kadeer. One Chinese journalist featured by Xinhua spoke on the topic of Western bias against China in international journalism:

“If such bias angered me, then a Washington Post story published on July 10 about 'the right way to help the Uygurs' simply left me in hallucination, as if Xinjiang were somewhere in the States” (“Biased,” 2009).

This quote underscores the almost proprietary disbelief of the speaker, whose anger originates from the sense of cultural division between the United States and China, and firmly categorizes the Urumqi riots as a domestic Chinese affair. Xinhua reported that veteran People’s Daily reporter, Ding Gang, wrote that he “marked incoming mails from the [Wall Street] Journal as spam” because he “care[s] about my own dignity and that of the Chinese nation.” (“Biased,” 2009). These quotes emphasize Gang’s disappointment in the Wall Street Journal and stir feelings of national pride and indignity in the audience; even if the reader is not a Chinese citizen, the universal concept of patriotism helps connect the reader to Gang emotionally and evokes sympathy. This heightens the overall pathos of the piece without ascribing an emotional response to Xinhua as an organization.

While international coverage was often referenced in summary, not direct quotation, Xinhua augmented its journalistic logos by citing two concrete examples of Kadeer’s lies, propagated by foreign reporting, in one article. One article notes that during an interview with Al Jazeera, Kadeer presented two photos of police abuse and Uyghur victimization from the Urumqi riots, that later were proven to originate from unrelated incidents and provinces far from
Xinjiang. The author of this commentary writes, “The separatists' tricks have been seen through one after another, and Kadeer has been exposed as a liar by her ‘truths’” (“Commentary: Lies,” 2009). In articles like this one, foreign media coverage acts as both a source of information about Kadeer and a platform for Xinhua to improve its credibility as a news agency that underscores its criticisms with logic. Here and in other, similar articles, Xinhua clearly engages in a conversation about the riots with the goal of defending Chinese authority and policies in the international arena.

Geography

Xinhua geographically framed the Urumqi riots in three different ways during the initial reporting period. In the population, 33% of the coded articles frame the riot situation in Xinjiang alone, without discussion of non-regional events, 26% of articles place the Urumqi riots within domestic China, and 41% broaden the geographic frame to include international countries or organizations (see table 2). Although the initial media coverage focused on a regional frame, by July 7, the third day since violence erupted, the international frame began to overtake the regional and domestic frames in popularity (see fig. 3). This indicates Xinhua reporters began examining the July 2009 riots in a global context in their English-language coverage from almost the very outset of the event, and that the Chinese government intended on engaging international audiences in conservation right away.
The international frame includes several elements placing the riots in a global context. International actors in the coverage fall into three broad categories: foreign separatists, foreign media covering the riots, and foreign governments. References to foreign separatists occur either in isolation or in conjunction with the World Uyghur Congress. In the coverage, the Chinese government accuses Rebiya Kadeer, president of the WUC, for planning and inciting the riots from abroad.
In this study, three types of articles using an international geographic frame relate foreign media to the riots. Three articles\(^1\) detail the Chinese invitation for foreign journalists to travel to Urumqi and cover the riots, and the special accommodations provided by the regional government for their use. The remaining six articles\(^2\) rebuke biased Western media coverage of the riots, outnumbering the first type of foreign media-sourced articles and overlapping with those articles that used the international media as an information source (“Biased Xinjiang,” 2009). The final way Xinhua globalized the geographic frame in the riot coverage was the inclusion of several response pieces describing foreign governmental responses to the riots. The majority of articles indicated China had the support of foreign governments in its handling of the riots, addressing official statements from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Micronesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Russia. Remaining articles criticized the Turkish call to address the riots in the UN Security Council, and attacked comments from the Turkish Prime Minister on the riots.

While the domestic frame appeared less frequently in the coverage, its treatment of the Guangdong factory incident is highly indicative of Chinese policy surrounding the riots. Five of the articles\(^3\) discussed the Shaoguan factory brawl. In that coverage, people connected to the factory brawl (and alleged rape that precipitated it) either condemned the riot or, alternatively, claimed that the incident “had nothing to do with the riot in Xinjiang” (“Victim’s relative: Shaoguan,” 2009). In one article, participants in the brawl recanted their statements online criticizing the factory and claiming that migrant workers from Xinjiang raped Han women in Shaoguan (“Rumor-mongers,” 2009). Xinhua clearly did not ignore the factory incident’s

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\(^1\) “Journalists from more than 60 overseas …,” “Urumqi attracts over 100 overseas …,” “Protestors surround foreign reporters in Xinjiang…”

\(^2\) “Police refute Rebiya Kadeer’s claim…,” “Opinion: Who would plead guilty…,” “Xinjiang riot well planned…,” “Biased Xinjiang riot coverage refuted.” “Commentary: Lies cover up no facts,” “Distorted reports…”

\(^3\) “Rumor-mongers express…,” “Uygur victims, family member …,” “15 suspects…,” “Victim’s relative: Shaoguan…,” “Uygur victims of south China …”
influence on the riots, yet attempted to distance the rape/brawl from the Urumqi riots in the public eye. Those people interviewed about the factory brawl expressed remorse for escalating the violence in Shaoguan and denied that a rape had taken place. By choosing to interview the brawl participants and their families, Xinhua strengthened the credibility of the narrative it portrayed, in which the factory incident was both unwarranted and unconnected to the actual instigation of the Urumqi riots. The remaining articles employed the domestic geographic frame by including statements from officials and civilians from throughout China condemning the riots, or by including comments from national officials on the healing or stability of Xinjiang.

**Ideological/Social Context**

The ideological or social context in which Xinhua framed the Urumqi riots is telling of the organization’s underlying rhetorical aims. This study examined two variables to determine what sociopolitical frame the riots were given: blame attribution and ideological connections.

The blame attribution variable explored how the Xinhua coverage described the rioters. In terms of ethnic composition, perpetrators were decreasingly depicted by their ethnic identity (Uyghur or Han) throughout the time frame, and increasingly reported as general rioters without identified ethnicity; some articles did not discuss the rioters at all (coded as “None”; see fig. 4).

The majority of instances in which ethnicity was explicitly attached to the rioters (e.g. “Uyghur rioters,” “Han rioters,” etc.) emerged in anecdotal accounts of the violence from witnesses. The day following the initial outbreak of violence on July 5, Xinhua interviewed victims of the first riot. One man watched “several Uygur youngsters smashing a No. 7 bus” before being assaulted by them, and another reported that he could not escape from a group of Uyghur men who beat
him in the street (Xu, 2009). In the following passage, the author hesitates to label the rioters’ ethnicity:

“Xinhua reporters saw at about 10 p.m. at the crossing of Xinhua South Road and Tianchi Road that a police station was damaged. A group of young men, appearing to be from ethnic minorities, were chanting slogans and wielding wooden clubs, while several others were distributing hoes” (Xu, 2009).

Among the 109 articles examined in this study, none included a direct and exclusive linkage between the Uyghur ethnic group and the rioters who initiated the violence. Often, when a Xinhua author identified some rioters as Uyghurs, the same article would clarify that some Han Chinese rioters also committed violent acts, or defend Uyghurs by reporting that many of them also helped riot victims escape. As reporting continued over the timeframe and the violence eventually ceased (by July 10), efforts to describe the rioters in an ethnically-neutral way increased. Foreign media framing of the riots as a justified public response to ethnic oppression may have influenced this depiction of the rioters, and prompted Xinhua to attempt to neutralize the ethnic factor in English-language coverage of the crisis.
Articles in this study attributed blame to both “foreign separatists” in general and the World Uyghur Congress, in particular, for planning and inciting the riots. Throughout the reporting period, articles were overall more likely to specifically assign blame to the World Uyghur Congress or Rebiya Kadeer (its president) for masterminding the riot than to redistribute blame to unnamed, unnumbered foreign actors or separatists (see fig. 5). The coverage mitigated blame attribution of local Urumqi rioters by honing in on Kadeer as the architect of the riots, neglecting to name any Urumqi residents responsible. A slew of commentary articles that attacked Kadeer’s character and referenced the governmental evidence against her (i.e. the misused Al Jazeera photos, and the questionable phone calls made just before the riots) successfully diverted blame for the riots overseas and away from Xinjiang.
The ideological connections variable quantified the frequency with which Xinhua connected the riots to one (or more) of the “three evil forces” of separatism, extremism, and terrorism. For the purposes of clarity, only instances where one of these three terms (or a variant form) was included in the text were coded. About half of the articles referenced separatism as a contributing factor in the riots, while the other half cited none of the “three evil forces” as causal elements (see table 3).

**Table 3: “Three Evil Forces” in the Xinhua Coverage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connection</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separatism</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremism</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Separatism and separatist actors were blamed for the riots from the second day of the reporting period, and mentioned more frequently than either extremism or terrorism. Terrorism was cited only slightly more often than extremism, and both were increasingly present in the articles towards the end of the timeframe studied (see fig. 6). Xinhua coverage\(^4\) framed the riots as an act of international terrorism, and accordingly called for the global community to present a united front against those responsible. This political goal explains the inclusion of “terrorism” among the ideological movements that provoked the riots in the Xinhua reporting. In the context of the “three evil forces,” extremism refers specifically to religious extremism. The Xinhua coverage avoided any acknowledgement that Islamic extremism could have influenced the rioters. Those articles mentioning Islam featured interviews with Islamic experts who denounced the riot on religious grounds\(^5\) or eyewitness accounts of an Islamic college sheltering riot victims\(^6\). While in the beginning of the reporting period, Xinhua heavily connected the riots with incumbent separatism in Xinjiang, as coverage continued, the elements of extremism and terrorism were introduced. From July 10 onward, the articles increasingly referenced “separatism, extremism, and terrorism” as a set phrase (see fig. 6).

\(^4\) “China urges int’l community for united stance on terrorism”
\(^5\) “Religious leader: Xinjiang riot “against Islamic doctrine,” “China’s religious circles slam riot in Xinjiang”
\(^6\) “Islamic college thanked for sheltering civilians in Urumqi riot”
Figure 6: "Three Evil Forces" in the Xinhua Coverage
Discussion

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the journalistic frames used in Xinhua’s early coverage of the 2009 Urumqi riots, examining how Xinhua portrayed the event in its immediate aftermath to the international media. English-language articles from the first ten days following the initial riot on July 5 were examined using frame analysis methods. The findings of the study determined the informational sources Xinhua relied on during this period, what geographic framing was used in depiction of the riots, and the ideological context Xinhua provided to explain the impetus behind the riot’s sudden eruption. In addition, the media frames and rhetorical strategies present in the Xinhua reporting were analyzed from an Aristotelian standpoint using the persuasive concepts of ethos, pathos, logos.

Findings indicate that Chinese political goals heavily influenced the Xinhua coverage of the riots, at least in those English-language articles that targeted an international audience. While governmental officials represented the primary sources of factual information for the coverage, civilian interviews supplied Xinhua with important eyewitness accounts of the riots. Civilian interviews with local eyewitnesses enhanced the pathos of the initial reporting, while interviews with foreign nationals living in Urumqi performed dual functions by supporting the historical efficacy of ethnic policy in Xinjiang and backing Xinhua’s journalistic credibility. Other foreign media sources refuted Western coverage of the riots, defending China’s political integrity in a global media setting.

The Xinhua coverage framed the Urumqi riots on regional, domestic, and international levels. By relating the riots to a nationwide call for ethnic unity and discussing them in reference
to the Shaoguan factory brawl, Xinhua broadened the geographic reporting frame to include larger mainland China. The international frame depended on mentions of global actors in conjunction with the riots, including foreign separatists, the international media, and different worldwide governments. Further analysis demonstrated that over the course of the 10-day timeframe, Xinhua increasingly depicted the rioters in an ethnically neutral manner, referring to the event’s culprits as general rioters without any distinguishing features. Moreover, specific attributions of blame to Rebiya Kadeer and the World Uyghur Congress were part of a larger ideological strategy that downplayed the influence of ethnic separatism in Xinjiang and domestic China. On the other hand, the “three evil forces” remained a prominent theme in the coverage, and the Xinhua articles were far more likely to accuse foreign separatists than either extremists or terrorists of engineering the riots.

Examinations of source attribution in the Xinhua coverage supported findings by Chen (2012) and Zeng et al. (2015), but also revealed that personal interviews with witnesses, victims, and other civilians represented a strong pathos-building strategy in early Xinhua coverage. The coded articles regularly relied on Chinese governmental sources to provide and corroborate their information, using the authority of the Chinese state to augment Xinhua’s reporting ethos and the credibility of the facts reported. This finding appears consistent with Xinhua’s background as an official national news agency and with the findings of Chen (2012) in his analysis of press conferences on the riots, as well as Zeng et al. (2015) in their analysis of long-term Xinhua coverage of the riots. In contrast with Zeng et al., however, this study found that interviews with civilians—including witnesses, victims, their relatives, and local Urumqi residents—constituted a frequently used source in even these first few weeks of Xinhua reporting. Heavy usage of civilian interviews substantiating Xinhua coverage could be explained by doubt about the
transparency of the Chinese media, and a desire to emotionally appeal to skeptical readers (especially foreign readers, whose experience of the riots is necessarily mediated by journalistic presentations of the event). This study also discovered that Xinhua used interviews with foreign nationals in Xinjiang (and with Chinese expatriates) as another channel for ethos building in the coverage. The foreign citizenship of these interviewees implies they offer a relatively objective perspective on the riots, because they may not feel as bound up in local politics and ethnic conflict as lifelong Urumqi citizens do. These interviews again reinforced Chinese claims of general ethnic harmony in Xinjiang, painting the riots as a freak event perpetrated by a very small group of dissenting individuals.

This study’s observation of the geographic frames used by Xinhua in coverage of the Urumqi riots built upon previous scholarship by Chen (2012) and Zeng et al. (2015), yet also demonstrated that the use of the international frame was unexpectedly significant in the articles. The findings confirmed that the regional frame was a popular device in the initial Xinhua articles, as reported by Zeng et al. (2015), especially in the factual, “hard news” articles during the first two days of reporting. However, the regional frame was hardly the dominant geographic frame in reporting. Instead, the international frame dominated coded articles in this study. In fact, the Xinhua coverage began contextualizing the event in an international frame almost immediately, and continued to do so in almost half of the articles examined—almost twice as often as Zeng et al. reported for the first week of Xinhua coverage. This difference could be explained by Zeng et al.’s definition of an international “space” frame as one that references more than one nation. The 2009 Urumqi riots were transnational by nature, innately tied to separatist questions of nationhood and an international Uyghur diaspora. To exclude the international actors who influenced the riots from the “international” frame, like the foreign
separatists that purportedly instigated them, or the foreign media outlets that presented the riots for consumption to the global community, disregards the ability of non-government actors to use technology and media to engage with international events. This study used a broader definition of the “international” frame. As a result, findings revealed another dimension to the media globalization of the Urumqi riots: that Xinhua used their English-language coverage as a platform to defend Chinese policy and counter the accusations by Western media of ethnic oppression or improper handling of the riots.

Findings show that the ideological/social context Xinhua provided for the riots shares many qualities with that used by government spokespersons in news conferences following the event (Chen, 2012). Notably, those news conferences were Chinese-language, and while most scripts were posted online, official translations were not available. Thus, the news conferences can be viewed as created for a domestic audience, and these Xinhua texts were aimed at an international audience. While Zeng et al. (2015) did not address the ethnic composition of the rioters or blamed parties in the Xinhua coverage, Chen (2012) noted that the news conferences were careful to emphasize that the riots did not originate from ethnic or religious tensions in the region. Chen’s findings are confirmed by the trend in the Xinhua articles, where rioters were referenced in an increasingly referring ethnically-neutral fashion during the timeframe. These findings seem to indicate that the “party line” for both domestic and international coverage demanded that media outlets downplay the ethnic composition of the rioters and the role that ethnic conflicts had in the event. Chen also observes that the Chinese government specifically blamed Rebiya Kadeer (in conjunction with the World Uyghur Congress) for masterminding the riots. Interestingly, though, the earliest accusation against Kadeer occurred in a State Council
Information Office news conference on July 17, whereas Xinhua articles from as early as July 6 already named Kadeer as a riot instigator.\(^7\)

Further investigation of the sociopolitical movements associated with the Urumqi riots indicates that the “three evil forces” of separatism, extremism, and terrorism were frequently cited in both news conferences (Chen, 2012) and in the initial Xinhua coverage of the event. Moreover, both the present study and the Chen study found that when considering the three forces separately, separatism was cited more frequently than either extremism or terrorism. Separatism was blamed as a primary instigating force behind the riots (as opposed to extremism or terrorism), perhaps because of its connection with the concept of territorial unity. After all, China has a wealth of experience defending its territorial integrity in the global media, as evidenced by its media handling of the violence in Lhasa, Tibet (2008) and student protests in Hong Kong (2014).

Several issues engendered differences between this study’s results and those of Chen (2012) and Zeng et al. (2015). The narrow timeline of this study, intended to capture the immediate response of the Chinese government (via Xinhua) to the riots, inevitably presents an obstacle to direct comparison with either the Chen or Zeng et al. studies, both of which use long-term reporting periods that extend several months after the riots. This study’s concentration on Xinhua English-language journalism also necessarily differentiates results from the Chen study, which observed Chinese-language news conference media. Despite the methodological similarity between this study and the Zeng et al. analysis of news frames in media coverage of the riots, this study completed a more detailed analysis of the Xinhua texts. By identifying the blame

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\(^7\) “Civilians and armed police officer killed in NW China violence”
attribution and ideological connections variables, this study was able to produce a more complete understanding of the sociopolitical context in which the riots were presented.

Through an in-depth analysis of the first ten days of Xinhua reporting on the 2009 Urumqi riots, this study explored Chinese journalistic framing strategies in an international media setting. This study offers a detailed portrait of how the modern Chinese state framed its domestic race relations to a global audience in the aftermath of an ethnically charged public crisis. Contrary to media studies on race riots in the United States (Campbell et al., 2004), Xinhua tried to neutralize the racial component of the riots instead of emphasizing racial divisions. Frequent civilian interviews presented Xinjiang as a generally ethnically harmonious place, underscoring polices supporting national unity. Evidence from this study indicates that the Chinese government actively engaged with the international media through its English-language reporting, freely using Xinhua to respond to concerns from foreign media outlets and governments about Chinese handling of the riots. Findings also demonstrate that Xinhua used selective blame attribution to divert attention away from domestic ethnic tension and separatism and onto Rebiya Kadeer. Through a combination of factual evidence, journalistic commentaries, and criticisms of her supporters, Xinhua coverage effectively undermined Kadeer’s credibility in the international community and portrayed her as the sole “mastermind” of the riots. Whether or not this tendency to target a scapegoat removed from domestic Chinese politics to blame in a crisis is a recurring strategy of the Chinese media remains unclear. I hope that the findings of this study can act as a foundation for future media studies seeking to understand Chinese crisis management and participation in ongoing global conversations on issues such as separatism, racism, and territorial integrity.
A variety of factors limited the scope of this study, including the timeframe and exclusive focus on Xinhua coverage. Although the 10-day timeframe captured the organization’s immediate reaction to the riots, the narrow reporting period restricted the ability of the study to assess changes in Xinhua’s reporting behaviors surrounding the riots over a longer period. Concentrating on Xinhua only and its English-language reporting also limited the study’s ability to compare the media frames present with those in coverage for a domestic audience. Future research extending the timeframe of the study may reveal different rhetorical strategies, or a shifting of the media frames used for source attribution, geographic framing, and ideological contextualization. Alternatively, examining domestic, Chinese-language riot coverage may expose different rhetorical strategies and underlying political aims in the reporting.

Frame analysis provided an effective foundation for this study, and the inherent flexibility of the blended inductive/deductive approach easily accommodates new variables as they emerged in the texts. As new actors or themes appeared in the coverage, they joined the framework in an organic fashion. This methodological approach straightforwardly shows frequency-based trends in the data, because the quantitative characteristics of this application of frame analysis are ideally suited for analysis of changing frames over time. At the same time, frame analysis in some ways oversimplifies the coding process; because variables in the text are coded as absent or present, in those frames where multiple variables appear (such as blame attribution), it remains unclear which variable had greater emphasis in the article. Thus, the frame analysis method requires close reading and rhetorical analysis to understand the functions of each frame and the inter-frame relationships identified in the coverage. In the future, a more qualitative approach might better capture the nuanced and overlapping nature of frames in the news coverage.
Conclusion

As globalization rapidly enhances interconnectedness and communication in the modern world, non-Western news media increasingly merits scholarly attention. Modern media studies remain focused on the cultural West, with the majority of scholarship addressing news media trends in Europe, the United States, and Australia. Massive technological advances, the rise of the Asian economy, and the fall of the Soviet Union have irrevocably altered the political landscape of the world, and, as a result, countries in the non-Western and developing world have become crucial areas of study. Given that new development strategies often diverge from Western neo-liberal precedent, scholars cannot assume that developing nations will imitate Western paradigms of media and rhetoric. Non-Western news media offers insight into how less-studied nations manage crises and public discontent, as well as revealing how they navigate the intersection of media and politics.

In its examination of non-Western news media, this study analyzes the framing strategies used by state-controlled Chinese news agency Xinhua in coverage of the 2009 Urumqi riots. China’s recent economic transformation and current geopolitical power make it an extremely influential part of the developing world; as such, state reaction to the politically sensitive Urumqi riots warrants study. The shocking violence of the riots engaged both domestic and international audiences, and forcibly stirred questions about China’s handle on domestic separatism, territorial integrity, and terrorism. By investigating internationally facing news media from Xinhua, this study has explored how the Chinese government uses the media to interface with the global community and how the state seeks to portray domestic politics to a worldwide audience. The
study revealed frequent usage of ethos-building techniques in the Xinhua coverage, as well as immediate attempts to redirect international attention to a foreign actor, Rebiya Kadeer, as a scapegoat for the event. In the aftermath of the riots, Xinhua acted not only as source of informational reporting, but as a defensive political tool used to reassert Chinese authority in the international reporting community.
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Appendix A

Codebook for Chinese News Media

RQ1: What source attribution was present in the Xinhua coverage of the Urumqi riots?

RQ2: How were the Urumqi riots framed geographically by Xinhua?

RQ3: What, if any, larger ideological or social context did Xinhua associate with the riots during the initial reporting period?

Codes

Basics
ID – Title of article
News Source – Name of news source (Xinhua)
Year/Month/Day/Time – Date published/time published
Language – Language in which the coder interprets the piece (English)

Source Attribution
Source
What people or organizations are cited as sources in the news media’s blame attribution?
(Coded under “Source” columns with the below labels)
0. None of the below
1. Government officials
2. Civilian interviews
3. Chinese news media
4. Foreign news media
5. Foreign government

Source Method
What type of material did the sources provide in the article?
(Coded under “Source Method” columns with the below labels)
0. None of the below/unclear
1. Data – organization names, statistics/numbers, historical stories
2. Opinions – no factual data provided to support certain statements

Geographic Framing
Country/region
What geographic setting does the story discuss?
(Coded under “Country” columns with the below labels)
0. None of the below
1. Xinjiang only
2. Xinjiang and larger China
3. XJ, China, and any other countries or international groups
Ideological/Social Context

Blame Attribution
Who is blamed for instigating the riots and/or promoting violence?
(Coded under “Who -1” through “Who – 7” columns with the below labels)
  0. None of the below – no rioters or planner discussed
  1. Chinese national government
  2. Regional (Xinjiang) government
  3. Rioters – general mention, without pinpointing of ethnic or social group
  4. Uyghur rioters
  5. The World Uyghur Congress (including Rebiya Kadeer)
  6. “Foreign separatists” (used as a set phrase)
  7. Han Chinese rioters

Ideological Connections
Does the article explicitly connect the riots to one or more of the “three evil forces”?
(Coded under “Connections” columns with the below labels)
  0. Isolation – riots are not explicitly connected to any other movement
  1. Separatism (ethnic)
  2. Extremism (Islamic)
  3. Terrorism (domestic or global)

Summary – brief summary of each article, with key points addressed
Appendix B

Coded Articles, Xinhua Online Archive (Chronological)


Academic Vita of Elyse Mark
elysegwen@gmail.com

Education
Major(s) and Minor(s): English & Chinese (majors); German & Business (minors)
Honors: English & Chinese

Thesis Title: Behind the Riots: Media Analysis of Xinhua Coverage of the 2009 Urumqi Riots
Thesis Supervisor: You Xiaoye

Work Experience
Panjiva (Shanghai, China) 09/2014 – 11/2014
Pre Sales Consultant
Pursued inbound sales leads, resulting in finalized CRM sales; provided customer support to clients in Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and the South Pacific.

Volunteer English Program in Chester County (PA) 06/2013 – 08/2013
Organizational Intern
Coordinated meetings between private tutors and immigrant/refugee ESL learners for a local nonprofit organization; compiled databases of tutoring resources.

Grants Received:
Schreyer Honors College Academic Excellence Grant (annual) 2012 – 16
Schreyer Ambassador Travel Grant – Kiel, Germany 07/2015
Schreyer Ambassador Travel Grant – Shanghai, China 09/2014

Awards:
Evan Pugh Scholar Senior Award, Penn State University 04/2016
DAAD 2015 University Summer Course Scholarship 07/2015
U.S. Department of State Critical Language Scholarship 03/2014
Evan Pugh Scholar Junior Award, Penn State University 04/2015
President Sparks Award, Penn State University 04/2014
President’s Freshman Award, Penn State University 04/2013

Professional Memberships:
Paterno Fellows Program (Class of 2016) 01/13 – present
Phi Beta Kappa 05/15 – present
Community Involvement:

Penn State Journal of International Affairs 09/2013 – 05/2016

*President, Editor*
Scheduled and executed the biannual timeline for journal publication, oversaw all recruitment activity, and collaborated with club members to solicit, screen, and edit collegiate articles on international affairs.

SHC 2014 Shaping the Future Summit 09/2013 – 05/2014

*Steering Committee Student Representative; Programming and Media Subcommittee Member*

The GLOBE, SHC Special Living Option 05/2012 – 04/2014

*House Representative*
Organized private lectures and activities for house members; collaborated with the Executive Board to plan and run the annual Humphrey Fellows dinner and networking event. Monitored fulfillment of residency requirements for over sixty students.

International Education:

*Suzhou University (with the U.S. Department of State)* 06/2014 – 08/2014

8-week summer language institute for intermediate Chinese hosted by Suzhou University, with intensive Chinese-only language policy and fully funded by the 2014 Critical Language Scholarship.

*East China Normal University* 09/2014 – 12/2014
Participated in an intensive accelerated Chinese language program at the advanced high level, and also completed a university-sponsored internship with sales consulting company Panjiva.

*Christian-Albrechts University of Kiel* 07/2015 – 08/2015
4-week summer language institute hosted by the Christian Albrechts Universität Kiel, including several language and cultural courses. Fully funded by the 2015 DAAD University Summer Course Scholarship.

Language Proficiency:

Mandarin Chinese (advanced)
German (advanced)